
Catana Elisabeta Simona*

POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest, FILS – DCLM, Splaiul Independentei Street, 060042, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Acknowledging the importance of developing the engineering students’ foreign language competence and communication skills for succeeding in their career in the 21st century knowledge society, this paper shows that teaching and learning presentation skills in the English language courses and seminars in a technical university in Romania will help the students to reach their career goals. Knowing the rules of giving an effective academic, technical or business presentation and gaining experience in preparing and delivering such presentations within the English language courses represent the prerequisites for successful communication for career purposes in our society.

Keywords: presentation skills; communication skills; preparation; career; success.

1. Introduction

This theoretical paper argues for the importance of developing the engineering students’ communication and presentation skills in the English language courses and seminars in a technical university in Romania with a view to preparing them for promising careers in the 21st century multicultural knowledge society sensitive to politically-correct communication approaches. We claim that apart from having specialized knowledge of a domain for a future
career, the engineering students need good communication skills in an international language for different academic, business and social contexts, having to know how to behave in different contexts of communication, respecting and understanding different interlocutors pertaining to different cultures, and being permanently aware that long-life learning is a necessary condition for individual progress and successful social interaction. Since professional communication is the key to successfully integrating into the 21st century knowledge society, this paper shows that teaching the most effective techniques of delivering an academic, technical or business presentation in the English language courses for engineering students is an important objective for at least two reasons. Firstly, effective presentations require good communication skills, planning, preparation, organization, respect for the audience, a politically-correct approach to the members of the audience. These aspects are also key issues to be considered for having a successful career in our society. Secondly, preparing these presentations in English, the international language of communication in multinationals, in business, in an academic environment, will help the engineering students to develop their foreign language competence, their communication skills, enhancing their motivation to put forth their ideas, proposals, projects and to argue for their benefits in an accurate, fluent and politically-correct manner.

Teaching English to the engineering students of a technical university in Romania, we have to acknowledge the importance of the following teaching objectives for the students’ future careers in our society: 1) motivating the students to develop their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, their communicative competence for giving clear, logical, coherent presentations in an accurate and fluent manner; 2) encouraging the students to use English correctly and coherently in various contexts of communication such as classroom debates on certain topics, classroom interviews including simulated job interviews, case study analyses; 3) enhancing their awareness of the importance of preparation for giving good presentations and showing them that one’s knowledge of a topic is not the only condition for giving an effective presentation, for convincing the audience and for attaining one’s goal. Our argument is that knowing how to prepare and deliver good presentations in English will be to the students’ benefit in their careers in the 21st century multicultural knowledge society.

2. Methodology

Choosing interactive methods, such as the communicative method of teaching the language and the prerequisites for successful academic, technical or business presentations, urging the students to develop their speaking skills, argumentation skills, behavioural skills and engaging them in teamwork communicative activities, monitoring, assessing and rewarding their performance, the students will be motivated to enhance their foreign language competence, to prepare their speeches and presentations resorting to learning, e-learning, practice and rehearsal. We argue that students should be convinced that it is more important to present an issue in a coherent way, explaining it in details in a clear, accurate, organized and logical way based on a well prepared plan than relying on technology and misusing it by reading the PowerPoint slides to the audience, looking more at the computer than at the members of the audience. Presentation skills must be developed within the foreign language classes by motivating the students to put forth their ideas in a coherent, logical way, encouraging them to be self-confident, creative, organized and helping them to overcome their shyness and fear of speaking by practice in teamwork activities, asking them to prepare and deliver presentations on given topics and on topics at choice.

To achieve our goal of developing the students’ presentation skills for the modern-age business purposes, we claim that two stages must be carefully taken into consideration: 1) the first stage when students must be motivated to deliver presentations without any technological support; 2) the second stage when students should be encouraged to give the same presentations using a technological support. At the first stage, students develop their language and communicative competence for delivering presentations without reading, insisting upon the preparation and the organization of their speeches, showing self-confidence and respect for the audience. At this stage, they do not use computers which can encourage them to read from slides, relying more on technology than on their own speaking skills. At the second stage, when students are encouraged to give the same presentations using PowerPoint slides and an overhead projector, we show the students how to use technology to give successful presentations, how to prepare the slides without filling them with the whole content of their presentation, how to permanently keep eye-contact with the audience, what body language they can use, what manners of behaviour and communication to approach. We propose these two stages for developing presentation skills based on our experience and remark that students
should get used to speaking in public without reading and without depending on technology. We have noticed that there is a tendency specific to low-achieving students to take computers for some instruments meant to replace their work, hiding behind them in order to read the information they put on the slides, reading the explanations under the graphs in the slides and considering that they have prepared their presentation enough. In this case, the students do not prove that they have acquired presentation skills. They feel under stress when they are asked to present a topic without a PowerPoint support or other equipment, being afraid of speaking in front of an audience. As our assessment experience shows, some of these students misunderstand the role of computers in giving effective presentations. They should be aware of the fact that computers should only help the presenter to reach his goal but should not replace his effort to give explanations based on a definite structure and logic. That is why we argue that in our English language courses and seminars in a technical university in Romania, besides teaching the language of presentations, besides asking the students to solve vocabulary and grammar exercises to practise this language, they should be offered models of successful presentations recorded on CDs or on videotapes, asking them to pay attention to the presenter’s means of starting the presentation, of arousing the audience’s interest in the topic, of structuring the body of the presentation using linking words, of ending the presentation by summarizing its key points, concluding and inviting the audience to ask questions. The competent presenter in the recorded successful presentations relies more on his speaking and presenting skills than on the PowerPoint slides which contain just key words to be enlarged upon and graphs, diagrams, charts, statistics to be explained. A competent presenter makes eye-contact with the members of the audience, rehearsing his presentation well in advance so that he could find it easy to speak on the topic, being convincing and self-confident, using body-language within the accepted limits of polite and politically-correct behaviour, keeping his motions under control.

Allocating at least two seminars for watching and discussing models of effective and ineffective presentations recorded on CDs and video tapes will help the students to understand the prerequisites for successful presentations: 1) planning the approach of the topic so that the audience finds it interesting and challenging; 2) planning the number of points to be focused on, the structure, the end of the presentation; 3) planning strategies to arouse the audience’s interest in the topic: rhetorical questions, introducing amazing facts, making polite, humorous remarks; 4) giving explanations in short, clear sentences, speaking slowly, clearly, fluently, convincingly and keeping eye-contact with the audience; 5) rehearsing the presentation well in advance, relying more on the presenter’s skills than on the PowerPoint support that should display only key words and not the whole presentation content to be read; 6) answering the audience’s questions at the end of the presentation. At this point, it is worth mentioning what aspects Martin Yate and Peter Sander (2003) recommend in their book, “The Ultimate Business Presentations Book. Make a Great Impression Every Time”, for preparing a successful presentation: “Step 1: take audience inventory; Step 2: assess the situation; Step 3: get organized; Step 4: get your thoughts on the table; Step 5: do the research; Step 6: enrich the research; Step 7: build the body; Step 8: build the presentation; Step 9: add visual aids; Step 10: prepare, practise and present” (Yate and Sander 2003: 19). As we can notice, Yate and Sander (2003) focus on the importance of preparing a presentation according to the audience’s needs in order to be appreciated and understood. In line with the same idea, in the book entitled “Presenting with Power. Captivate, Motivate, Inspire and Persuade”, Shay McConnon (2002: 70) shows that success is also ensured by the way we appear in front of the audience, by the way we gesticulate, the way we look, sound and get dressed and concludes that “you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression” (McConnon 2002: 80). Therefore, preparation is very important for successful presentations.

By insisting upon the necessity of adapting our presentations to the audience’s profile by searching for details about it in advance, we emphasize the significant role of respect and consideration for our interlocutors in our multicultural knowledge society. According to Martin Yate and Peter Sander (2003), “good presentations are effective at communicating the message and achieving desired outcomes. Good presentations are also efficient – they achieve their objectives with the least amount of work on your part and on the part of the audience. When you understand your audience, you’ll understand what makes a presentation effective and efficient for them” (Yate and Sander 2003: 11). If we understand our audience, we meet its expectations in a convincing, respectful way, keeping it focused on the topic based on our good communication and behavioural skills which are developed in time with practice and experience. In the book entitled “Presentation Skills for Students”, Joan van Emden and Lucinda Becker (2004: 1) enlarge upon the importance of learning to speak in front of an audience which implies developing a
“transferable skill” one can use anytime irrespective of one’s job or career: “Developing your ability to speak to an audience is one of the greatest benefits you’ll ever get from your time in further or higher education. (…) Transferable skills are those that you can take with you. The ability to speak well enough to interest, influence or persuade other people is a major asset, whatever you choose to do in the future” (Emden and Becker 2004: 1). To develop such speaking skills, students have to make a conscious effort to prepare and practise, to look at models so that they become good presenters or what Kerry Shephard (2005: 103) calls “engaging presenters”: “engaging presenters will spend as little time as possible looking away from their audience, at notes or at the screen. Engaging presenters will also use hand gestures for emphasis or to gain and maintain audience attention. They often have open arms and exposed palms. They will also use non-verbal signals consistently and synchronized with verbal messages. A speaker who steps backwards at the same time as making positive, inclusive verbal comments is likely to be interpreted negatively no matter how positive the words are” (Shephard 2005: 103-104).

Focusing on interesting and modern didactic materials to teach the language of presentations for academic, business or technical purposes, to develop the students’ presentation skills, they will be motivated to upgrade their communication skills. An example of a relevant teaching material is Unit 8, “Oral Presentations” (pp. 166-180) in the textbook, “English for Professional Communication”, written by Blandu et. al (2004). This unit invites the students to do vocabulary exercises – fill in the blanks and matching exercises – related to the context of presentations, to the way we should start and end the presentation, exercises regarding the way we should prepare and present the body of the presentation, the way we should create and present visuals. We recommend this textbook for accomplishing our teaching objective. Moreover, to give other examples of helpful teaching materials, we should mention Unit 4, “Voice and Visuals” (pp. 20-25), and Unit 8, “Promoting your Ideas” (pp. 40-45), in the textbook, “In Company. Upper Intermediate”, written by Mark Powell (2004). These two units aim at developing the students’ reading, listening, speaking and presentation skills by interesting exercises and discussion topics.

To assess the students’ language competence and presentation skills, we propose the following two activities:

1) Teamwork activity to be performed within 2 English language seminars:
Work in groups of 4 in order to prepare a 5-minute presentation on one of the following topics at choice: Robots of the future; A useful software application for the future; An electronic device that you would like to invent.
Prepare an introduction: greet the audience, express your thanks for the audience’s decision to listen to your presentation, introduce yourself, your topic and the points of your presentation. In the body of your presentation, enlarge upon each point mentioned in the introduction, making short, clear sentences and using at least 10 linking words. Have a graph / chart / diagram or another visual drawn on a piece of paper and explain it in details. In the end, tell the audience that you have finished your presentation, make a brief summary of the key points that you have talked about, draw a conclusion, thank the audience for listening and invite them to ask questions. Having prepared this presentation in a two-hour seminar, the spokesperson of each group will deliver it in front of the colleagues in the next two-hour seminar. Feedback will be given at the end of all presentations.

2) An individual 5-minute presentation for the final exam:
Give an individual five-minute presentation on a topic at choice and use a PowerPoint support. Follow the instructions given for the previous teamwork activity mentioned above. Follow the rules of giving an academic presentation and use a formal language register.

The students’ performance will be assessed based on the way they have prepared the structure of the presentation in a clear, coherent way following the given instructions, speaking without reading in a fluent, accurate, polite way, keeping eye-contact with the audience, explaining all visuals and having a formal language register. Following these presentations and the feedback given, the students will better understand the necessity to develop their language and communicative competence, their presentation skills as well as the importance of preparation and rehearsal.

3. The engineering students’ perspective on preparing and delivering effective presentations for specific purposes

We reemphasize the idea that besides studying for developing specialized knowledge of a certain domain for a future career, the students should also enhance their communication skills for entering the job market, for meeting the requirements of a job in a multinational where they are asked for excellent communication abilities, cooperation skills, flexibility, open-mindedness, a politically-correct verbal and behavioural approach. That is why this paper
shows that foreign language courses in a technical university should raise the students’ awareness of the fact that if they just have very good knowledge of their technical domain, they will find it difficult to succeed in their future careers unless they develop their communication skills in a foreign international language, unless they practise the foreign language within the course activities such as discussions, verbal analyses of case studies, simulated job interviews, presentations on given topics or on topics at choice. The students should be aware of the fact that technology and particularly, computers, are not meant to replace their effort to prepare the structure of the presentation, to develop and use their speaking skills in order to give very good academic, technical or business presentations.

To find out their perspective on the ways of delivering successful presentations, the students have been asked the following questions: 1) Do you think that investing a lot of time in research and preparation represents a condition for giving a very good presentation?; 2) If we know the subject of the academic / technical / business presentation very well, is it necessary to prepare this presentation in terms of structure, to adapt it to the audience’s profile and to rehearse it in advance? Enlarge upon your answer; 3) What makes a presentation clear, easy to follow, easy to understand, appealing to the audience?; 4) What is the role of technology in delivering effective presentations?; 5) Should the slides and the visuals in a PowerPoint presentation speak more about a topic than the presenter? Should the content of the slides arouse the audience’s interest more than the presenter’s speaking skills?

60% of the students who were interviewed claimed that even if you know a topic inside out, you need to develop your communication skills by participating in the communicative activities in the English language courses and seminars, you need to adapt your behavioural skills and attitude to the cultural background of the audience, you have to display a polite attitude, a politically-correct approach, you have to find out what kind of audience you are going to address so that you could adapt your language and, last but not least, you should structure your presentation very well, mentioning your objectives from the very beginning, saying how many parts the presentation has and enlarging upon each one of them in details. These students acknowledge the importance of preparing a presentation as well as the importance of developing appropriate communication and behavioural skills.

40% of students claim that effective presentations are the result of the presenter’s knowledge of the subject which should be introduced and enlarged upon naturally and spontaneously so that the presenter does not have to learn the presentation by heart. In these students’ opinion, the preparation of a presentation implies mechanical learning of its content organization. They prefer writing the content on PowerPoint slides and reading it. To them, more preparation, including the ability to present without reading any notes, would be a waste of time. They would rather rely on the PowerPoint support than on their own speaking and presenting skills which should be developed within the English language courses and seminars and also by individual practice and rehearsal. They claim that engineers do not have to be very good speakers as long as they are experts in their technical domain and that is why they do not attach importance to developing their communicative competence for what we consider effective presentations.

To argue against these students’ view, we have to remind them that in our 21st century multicultural knowledge society no one should be limited to the knowledge of one’s domain of study for succeeding in one’s future career and for integrating into this society. In their jobs in a multinational or in a smaller company, they will interact with other people, they will be asked to present their ideas, achievements, plans, projects, to give presentations in the department meetings and they will have to know how to communicate correctly, fluently, coherently, politely and in a politically-correct manner in an international language of communication such as English. Unless they attach importance to actively participating in the language courses and seminars at university, practising the language by preparing various types of speeches for debates, simulated job interviews, presentations on certain topics, unless they develop their foreign language competence by reading articles in English, solving vocabulary and grammar exercises, watching and listening to model debates, job interviews, presentations, adapting their attitude and approach to the cultural and educational background of the audience, their chances of success are reduced.

4. The role of technology in developing the students’ presentation skills

The internet, which enables e-learning, facilitates the students’ preparation of different types of presentations. The symbol of the 21st century knowledge society, the Internet is an attractive means of learning as students can use it anytime from their laptops, tablets and mobile phones instead of going to the library. It offers models of effective
academic, business and technical presentations, helping the students to prepare their own presentations. Investing a lot of time and effort in preparing a good presentation based on research and having a technological support, such as a PowerPoint support, the presenter’s goal will be attained. Technology plays an important role in delivering interesting, attractive presentations.

On the other hand, as our experience shows, low-achieving students take the Internet information for granted without quoting the site and the author as if that information was everyone’s property. Lazy students just reproduce the information found on the Internet when asked to give presentations. In this case, the Internet technology represents a great disadvantage. Moreover, lazy students consider that computers can replace their work, attaching more importance to what they write in the slides, just reading them during the presentation without looking at the audience, without showing any presentation skills. If asked to turn off their computer, they will not be able to present their topic in details, in a structured, coherent and fluent manner because they have not prepared enough, having just put some information in the slides in order to read everything. They usually display attractive visuals, leaving them unexplained as if everyone was supposed to understand them perfectly. In conclusion, it depends on the students’ education to use technology to their advantage or not in giving good presentations.

5. Conclusions

Developing presentation skills in the English language courses for engineering students requires language competence, very good communication and behavioural skills, self-confidence, respect and one’s motivation to work hard in order to accomplish one’s objectives. Therefore, raising the students’ awareness of the necessity to prepare and give academic, technical or business presentations based on rules, on a clear structure, using an appropriate language register and technological support would contribute to the students’ future success in their careers in our knowledge society wherein adequate, politically-correct communication is a must.

Using the communicative method of teaching the prerequisites for giving very good academic, technical and business presentations and involving the students in teamwork activities in order to prepare and deliver presentations on certain topics, we motivate them to cooperate, to speak, to share ideas, to organize their thoughts and to present them in a logical sequence in a convincing and self-confident way in order to accomplish their task and in order to meet the audience’s expectations. Thus, the students will have the chance to improve their communicative competence and presentation skills. Language competence and communicative competence are to be developed in time based on a lot of preparation, practice and feedback. English language courses and seminars in a technical university in Romania should offer the students a great opportunity to enhance their ability to communicate professionally in a work environment, in an academic environment or in a social environment. Becoming competent communicators, students have high chances of achieving success in our 21st century knowledge society.

References