

# CULTURAL THREADS IN ORAL PRESENTATIONS

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**Abstract:** *Foreign language education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century does no longer focus on the merely linguistic competence, but rather on instructing our learners how to use the language communicatively. Given the globalization we are experiencing, communicative competence equally involves cultural awareness as a means to effectively communicate with other people who do not share the same cultural background. Oral presentations are complex classroom activities that can train learners to become competent oral communicators who are culturally sensitive.*

*The paper will discuss the impact that culture has on oral competence and signal some important cultural cues learners should be made aware of when delivering live presentations.*

**Keywords:** *oral communication competence, presentation skills, cultural cues.*

## Introduction

In a country where English is taught as a foreign language, learners of English usually suffer from the lack of sufficient opportunities to practise the language. As a rule, students can practice English orally in micro-teaching and learning activities. That is the reason why oral presentations are widely used in foreign language teaching as well as other disciplines<sup>1</sup>. The field literature<sup>2</sup> further suggests another advantage: an effective oral presentation can give non-native speakers a great deal of confidence in using the foreign language proficiently.

Oral communication competence can be defined as the ability to communicate appropriately in the language of instruction. The ability to communicate effectively with other people is an important skill for successful academic and professional achievement. On the one hand, competence in communication includes many different types of skills, including the traditional skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. On the other hand, communication also includes less visibly recognized skills such as the ability to understand and comply with the “rules” or conventions of communication in a particular culture and situation.

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, M., & Storey, A. Speakeasy: Online Support for Oral Presentation Skills. In *ELT Journal*, Volume 57/4, 2003, 370-376.

<sup>2</sup> Boyle, R. Modelling Oral Presentations. *ELT Journal*, Volume 50/2, 1996, 115-126.

Developing competence in communication is an ongoing process, and as some researchers remarked, communication skills are constantly being refined; the development of communication begins in the earliest infancy and continues throughout life.<sup>3</sup>

Today's world has grown to be an intercultural interaction network in which successful communication with other people involves the understanding of a meaning which "is by no means guaranteed because conversants share the same dictionary".<sup>4</sup> Thus, 'meaning' is not only linguistically determined but it is attributed in accordance with the cultural context and schemata of the parties involved in communication.

Delivering oral presentations in class can be one of the basic activities for the students of the English Language Teaching Programs that provides them with both the practice of speaking in English and the opportunity of applying appropriate cultural norms for communication.

In the light of these preliminary considerations, in the first part of the paper we will discuss the reason why oral presentations can be a good choice for developing our learners' competency in oral communication. The second part will focus on some cultural cues our learners need to be made aware of while delivering an oral presentation.

### **Oral Presentations – What for?**

The common rationale for including oral presentation skills into the foreign language syllabus is that students will surely need oral presentation skills, while they are still pursuing their university degree and after they graduate. When considering the relevance of oral presentation skills for teaching and learning, we need to quote Cohen and Jensen (2000) who say that, although oral communication competence is on every job description, "the value of presentation skills is often overlooked". The authors further consider oral presentation skills as "one of the best 'career enhancers' that can be added to one's collection of marketable qualities."<sup>5</sup>

Intercultural competence holds a key position in foreign language education because language and culture are regarded as inseparable constructs.<sup>6</sup> The forms and uses of a language are dependent on the

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<sup>3</sup> Whitmore, K.F., & Goodman, Y.M. Transforming curriculum in language and literacy. In S. Bredekamp & T. Rosegrant (Eds.), *Reaching potentials: Transforming early childhood curriculum and assessment*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995, 145-166.

<sup>4</sup> Barnlund, D., (1994), *Communication in a Global Village*. In Samovar & Porter (eds. 1994), 26-35.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, J. and Jensen, D., (2000), "Oral Presentation Skills." Search Masters International. Retrieved 08/25/08, from [www.searchmastersinternational.com](http://www.searchmastersinternational.com)

<sup>6</sup> Byrnes, H. Toward academic-level foreign language abilities: Reconsidering foundational assumptions, expanding pedagogical options. In B.L. Leaver & B.

cultural values of the society in which that language is spoken. Learners must develop an awareness of the fact that verbal and non-verbal behaviours, that are appropriate in their own speech community, are perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They need to understand that, in order for their own communication to be effective, language use must be always endorsed by culturally appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Therefore, an oral presentation should be assessed in terms of

- organization (introduction, body, and conclusion),
- content (choice of topic, appropriate information to support the topic, transitions, vocabulary, and grammar),
- delivery (verbal and non-verbal communication),
- time management.

### **Cultural cues in oral communication**

The essential points to consider when training learners for live deliveries refer to the preparation, delivery and ending of the oral presentation. These aspects are a harmoniously blended mixture of linguistic competency and cultural awareness.

One of the first things to discuss is the 'status' of the presenters - they are the centre of attention at the time of the presentation. Therefore, the way they look is very important - they should not only sound professional but they must look the same way. At this stage a discussion about the conventions of the dress code for professional presentations can be initiated, i.e. formal versus casual wear. This awareness-raising activity can be supported by video illustrations or simply brainstormed from the learners' previous experience of attending a presentation.

Another thing to look at is 'space' and 'movement' – competent presenters should have control over spatial distances in relation to their audiences, e.g. where to stand so that the audience can easily see them and the projection of their presentation at all times. Teachers can demonstrate some of these instances themselves or even invite learners to participate.

A decisive moment in delivering an oral presentation is given by the way in which the presentation is started. The so-called 'introduction' is mainly based on cultural insights – creating the right atmosphere, knowing who the listeners are in terms of professional expertise and age, and paying due respect to them by giving them appropriate guidance and landmarks on the content to be delivered. Thus, getting the audience's attention, greeting and welcoming the audience, introducing oneself,

informing about the aim, content and length of the presentation, as well as telling how questions will be handled are some of the best ways. Excellent examples for clarifying all these points are to be found in *English for Business Communication*.<sup>7</sup>

As for the language of the presentation itself, apart from fluency and accuracy, the learners should use a specific repertoire which bears cultural imprints as well. Presentations are not made for presenters, they are made for the listening audiences. As a result, presenters should tailor their delivery to the needs of their audiences. A good presentation should prove that it considers the audience at all times. Thus, presenters must know how to organize the presentation and be familiar with “signposting” techniques which include phrases and sentences that show when a new point is made, e.g. “*Moving on to the next point/part of my presentation ...*” or “*Now I'd like to move to another point...*” Language is as important when elaborating on a subject, e.g. “*I'd like to expand more on this problem...*”, or when going back to something mentioned before, e.g. “*Going back to something I stated earlier. . .*” Also, a presenter should know how to signal the end of the presentation. To this effect, the use of phrases that clearly indicate this intention should be used, e.g. “*in conclusion, to sum up, etc.*” Proper verbal communication also includes a tone of voice appropriate for the size of the room in which the presentation is made. The quality of voice refers to loudness, speed, variety, pitch (high and low), silent moments or pauses as well as pronunciation.

When training learners for making oral presentations, teachers need to make them aware of the way in which written information must be handled. Notes on sheets of paper may be useful for presenters to glance at during the presentation. However, reading from notes or from the slides is not advisable at all, and neither is memorizing the presentation. “Nothing bores an audience faster than the presenter who avoids any and all eye contact with them by reading words from a prepared speech”.<sup>8</sup> To make sure that a presentation goes smoothly, the presenter should practise it several times before the actual delivery. Good preparation helps presenters, particularly non-native speakers, to feel confident and secure at the time of the presentation. This will also help them comply with another ‘cultural’ norm - ‘time’ - and not go over the time allocated for their presentation.

A professional presenter should also display proper non-verbal communication. According to the specialized literature, in a face-to-face

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<sup>7</sup> Sweeney, S., *English for Business Communication*, Module 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 43-79.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, J. and Jensen, D., (2000), “Oral Presentation Skills.” Search Masters International. Retrieved 08/25/08, from [www.searchmastersinternational.com](http://www.searchmastersinternational.com).

encounter, 93 percent of the impact of your message is nonverbal while 7 percent of the impact of your message is verbal.<sup>9</sup> Nonverbal communication refers to communication “effected by means other than words”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, nonverbal language is an important cultural aspect of oral communication as most of the illocutions are conveyed by means of nonverbal cues. Attracting and holding the audience’s attention” is crucial for a successful presentation<sup>11</sup>, and this requires the presenter to “make regular eye contact with the audience, and connote confidence via body language.”<sup>12</sup>

Managing eye contact in oral communication is crucial on the part of presenters, since the addressees may easily lose interest or concentration. More importantly than that, it may happen that the addressee is likely to assign various meanings to eye-contact that the speaker did not intend to convey. For example, a look-away behaviour can be interpreted as either offensive: the presenter is talking ‘to’ the audience instead of ‘with’ them, or dishonest in British and American culture. Eye contact helps the presenter to show interest in the audience and keep the audience’s attention. Nonverbal behaviour is closely intertwined with verbal communication, so a good eye contact is also the prerequisite of delivering the material as a talk rather than reading from notes or reciting from memory. Another piece of advice is that cards for notes should be unobtrusive so that the presenter’s face remains visible to the audience.

Moreover, as already mentioned before, presenters should be aware of their body movement as they are the centre of attention in the room. Therefore, they should avoid moving from side to side in a tense manner but stand straight and relaxed instead.

Another element of nonverbal communication that has an impact on oral communication is ‘gesture’ which “refers to spontaneous bodily movements that accompany speech.”<sup>13</sup> The most common body parts involved in gestures are the hands, fingers, arms, head, face, eyes, eyebrows, and trunk of the speaker. Gestures are an integral part of

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<sup>9</sup> Borg, J. *Persuasion: The Art of Influencing People*. UK: Pearson Educated Limited, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Knapp, M.L., & Hall, J.A. *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*. Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Hill, M. & Storey, A., (2003), Speakeasy: Online Support for Oral Presentation Skills. *ELT Journal*, Volume 57/4, 2003, 370-376.

<sup>12</sup> Surratt, C.K., *Instructional Design and Assessment: Creation of a Graduate Oral/Written Communication Skills Course*. In *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 70 (1), Article 05, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Loehr, D.P., (2004), *Gesture and Intonation*. Doctoral Thesis. Georgetown University Washington, DC., 2004, p. 6.

language as much as are words, phrases, and sentences<sup>14</sup> because they provide a meaning apart from that provided by speech.<sup>15</sup> Learners should again be made aware of the fact that verbal and nonverbal communication work together to convey a message. Spoken communication can be improved by using culturally appropriate body language that reinforces and supports what is being said. This can be especially useful when making oral presentations.

### **Conclusion**

Starting from the assumption that every learner can acquire presentation skills by applying a few techniques, cultural sensitivity and self-confidence, we would like to conclude by reiterating the main points presented in this paper. Communication is both verbal and nonverbal. All communication intrinsically involves a cultural component that cannot be neglected. The main aspects to pay attention to in live deliveries are the quality of the voice, the rapport with the audience, use of written notes and visuals as well as time. Rapport with the audience involves attention to eye contact, sensitivity to how the audience is responding to your talk and what you look like from the point of view of the audience. If we were to make some final recommendations we would just say: “Remember why you are giving a presentation, what you want to convey, and what you want your audience to recall. Keep your visuals clear, your time focused, and check a mirror before you enter the room. Have the self-confidence that comes from adequate preparation. Then, give a great talk. . .”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> McNeill, D., *Hand and Mind: What Do Gestures Reveal about Thought*. Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Loehr, D.P., (2004), *Gesture and Intonation*. Doctoral Thesis. Georgetown University Washington, DC., 2004. p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, J. and Jensen, D., (2000), “Oral Presentation Skills.” Search Masters International. Retrieved 08/25/08, from [www.searchmastersinternational.com](http://www.searchmastersinternational.com)

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