

Mastering Presenters by Means of Visual Aids: Assessing Students' Oral Presentations

María Luisa Renau Renau
Universitat Jaume I, Castellón, Spain

The introduction of the ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in education has set a new paradigm in knowledge acquisition. The Internet, overhead projectors and interactive boards, presentation and animation software, and online databases are only some resources that teachers use in order to present information in a more dynamic, immediate, and stunning way, transforming and revitalizing the teaching-learning process. The ICTs have been established in the university classroom and nowadays, they have become an essential part in this teaching-learning process. Lecturers make use of them in the same proportion as they make of traditional materials. At the same time, students have to be acquainted with these new technologies and they also have to be able to deal with them. The objective of this paper is twofold: On the one hand, we study and show how our students make use of the technologies when they have to face their oral presentations in the subject "Advanced English: Professional Settings" (English Studies Degree at Universitat Jaume I in Castellón, Spain). It is acknowledged that visual aids can be helpful to support a speech, but we want to analyze if the visual aids are successfully applied, how and to which extent. On the other hand, we want to make out the opinions of their classmates about the use of these graphical resources (students fill in a questionnaire about the effectiveness of the visual aids in their classmates' presentations and how they would improve them). Results demonstrate that not only teachers make advantage of the new technological resources, we show, based on the students' oral presentations and their peer-reviews, that also our university students are increasingly aware of the advantage and importance of the ICTs in the classroom.

Keywords: VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), multimedia resources, visual aids, oral presentations

Introduction

New technologies are part of our daily life, regardless of whether we are ready to deal with them or not. Their impact on our lives is so overwhelming that we see ourselves forced to keep up with them. And so should our educational system (Tíscar, 2009). The fact that teachers face a digital generation is not news for anyone. This process not only affects teachers; students must also come to terms with the fact that they are no longer expected to be mere collectors of information, but to become intelligent information users. It is essential for the student to be able to efficiently search for information, process it, communicate it, and transform it into knowledge. This process involves a good use of one's intellectual and emotional capacities, and triggers a more and more efficient and autonomous learning process, according to individual objectives and needs. New technologies provide us with an endless range of possibilities; thanks to them, we can share resources with other educational centres and we can practically find information about anything, anytime. The Internet offers

us online dictionaries, electronic libraries and encyclopaedia, reviews, newspapers, databases, and guided virtual visits to almost any museum or city around the world. More and more companies have understood the impact of new technologies and are redirecting their efforts into creating educational computer games and resources, transforming the craving for information into an extremely profitable business (Digital Literacy European Commission, 2008). Considering this scenario, we cannot afford to forget that, as the development of new technologies affects the way we communicate and interact, we learn and live; the educational system must be able to come up with ideas and schemes that will allow it to adapt itself to these new requirements.

The New Teacher's Role in the Digital Era

The traditional teacher-centred paradigm progressively opened the way to a new paradigm, learner-oriented, in which ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) play an important role (Luzón, Ruiz-Madrid, & Villanueva, 2010). As ICTs made their way in the language classroom, the traditional role of the teacher has seen itself broadened and diversified; the traditional holder and transmitter of information (reflected in methods such as grammar translation or direct method) slowly evolved towards that of a counsellor through the learning process, a friendly guide aware of the individual differences among learners in point of needs, learning styles and paces, aiming at enhancing the learners' autonomy by training them into taking responsibility of their own learning process.

Nevertheless, the relentless progress of technological devices represents a continuous challenge for the language teacher, redefining the language learning-teaching process. Basic computer expertise (i.e., managing and manipulating data, the use of software, etc.) compounded with an open, responsible, critical, and reflective attitude towards ICTs and a continuous pedagogical and technological training in the use and implementation of ICTs in the classroom are key requirements if we want to meet the challenges and endless opportunities provided by the technological advancements, and thus improve the language teaching-learning process.

The analytical survey ICTs in the teaching and learning of foreign languages: State-of-the-Art, Needs and Perspectives published by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) (2004), define the new literacies required of language teachers as follows:

- (1) Scientific literacy: the ability to think scientifically in a world governed by technology and science;
- (2) Digital literacy: the ability to use and apply ICTs adequately in language research, activities, and tests;
- (3) Critical literacy: the ability to evaluate any given sources of information;
- (4) Linguistic literacy: the ability to keep in line with changes in language use and usage and adapt materials to these changes;
- (5) Cultural literacy: the ability to observe and record changes in the society of the target language and its direct implications for language teaching.

According to the same publication, the new teachers' roles are:

- (1) *Facilitator and guide*: Teachers must guide the students through the selection and independent use of materials, as well as responding to their personal needs;
- (2) *Mediator*: Teachers must be able to act as intermediaries between students and the target society and language;
- (3) *Researcher*: Teachers must keep up with developments in the field of modern languages and applied linguistics;
- (4) *Designer of learning scenarios*: The diversity of the available learning scenarios represents a challenge

to teachers;

(5) *Collaborator* (with other teachers): Keeping up with development of learning environments implies collaboration with other teachers for a more fruitful coordination;

(6) *Orchestrator* (technology, learners, and curriculum): The new teacher needs to develop management skills and be able to find the balance between his student's learning styles;

(7) *Evaluator and self-evaluator*: The new teacher must not only be able to evaluate materials, tools, and methods, but also be able to evaluate the learning process in itself and the final product, revising the model of evaluation if needed and making it suit his/her particular situation.

To conclude, these roles involve developing and putting into practice a new set of skills and competencies derived from the need of adapting ourselves to new demands:

Teachers, when mastering presentations, must follow these rules¹:

- (1) Be systematic and motivate the learner by giving clear achievable targets at all stages;
- (2) Be knowledgeable about presentations in order to introduce the learner to a wide range of research and techniques;
- (3) Not give absolute "dos and don'ts" but rather introduce research and techniques in such a way that the learner has access to an extensive range of skills and can "pick and mix" for each individual presentation;
- (4) Motivate the learner by explaining the theory behind the practice;
- (5) Let the individual learner find what suits and does not suit his/her personality in order to develop an authentic style;
- (6) Develop a creative training environment where every trainee feels safe, has fun, experiments, experiences success, makes mistakes, learns from mistakes, and takes a risk from time to time;
- (7) Give realistic models (presentations given by actors are often inauthentic and give learners unachievable goals and expectations);
- (8) Provide trainees with the time and space required for preparation and practice;
- (9) Guide learners on how to give and use feedback;
- (10) Give constructive feedback;
- (11) Provide scope for self-reflection.

The New Learner's Role in the Digital Era

Learning in the digital era implies the assumption of new roles from teachers' part. But, just like teachers, learners must also assume their new roles. The shifting towards learners' centeredness in the language learning process involves a growing awareness of their own learning process and taking on new responsibilities. The learner, as an active agent in his/her own learning process, must be willing to reflect upon the learning process and evaluate it, make choices regarding learning strategies and styles, and adapt them to his/her own needs.

The new learner must not only be aware of all the pedagogical aspects influencing his/her learning process, but must also be able to use to his/her own benefit all the tools and opportunities provided by technological advancements. New technologies allow the learner to communicate with other learners or native speakers of the target language in collaborative environments (e.g., chat rooms, e-mail, etc.) and grant them access to authentic materials (e.g., videos, articles, etc.).

¹ Presentation in English. Retrieved from <http://www.businessenglishonline.net/resources/presentations-in-english-teachers-notes/>.

As traditionally carried out by professors, students have to be able to perform good presentations, use solid foundations, connect with the audience, use effective visuals, take their presentations to a new dimension successfully and effectively by integrating rhetorical techniques, develop the content of their presentations and take their presentations to a new level—they become “master presenters”, develop awareness of their own styles, consider audience preferences and be able to handle questions or question and answer sessions effectively.

Under this scenario, we could conclude that the learning process can become much more enriching and rewarding as long as both teachers and learners assume their new roles and have positive attitudes towards change.

Method

We study and show how our students make use of the technologies when they have to face their oral presentations (see topics in the “Appendix”) in the subject “Advanced English: Professional Settings” (English Studies Degree at Universitat Jaume I in Castellón, Spain). It is acknowledged that visual aids can be helpful to support a speech but we want to analyze if the visual aids are successfully applied, how and to which extent. On the other hand, we want to make out the opinions of their classmates about the use of these graphical resources (students fill in a questionnaire about the effectiveness of the visual aids in their classmates’ presentations and how they would improve them).

Because of the importance of English in professional contexts earlier this millennium, and preponderance of this language in the field of culture, economy, and society, we consider essential to develop the acquisition of knowledge of the English language advanced level according to the framework of reference for languages and its application to professional contexts, in its speech genres and writings, with particular emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of language.

The teaching of this subject is eminently practical. Thus, students of this subject should combine theory undoubtedly necessary, provided under the parameters of tutored practice, both in the classroom as in the activities which develop externally. They also emphasize the practical sessions provided (both problem-solving and exercises such as laboratory practice) and work sequentially to develop in the various seminars to make.

To prepare and implement this subject and these oral presentations, we have taken into account firstly, the 3Ps in pedagogy (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008): Personalization, Participation, and Productivity; secondly, when working in groups, establishing a model for the students to be able to review their peers’ works (Lai, Berg, & McDonald, 2010); and finally, paying special attention to the following generic and specific competences: autonomous learning, capacity for analysis and synthesis, capacity to manage information, capacity for organizing and planning, capacity to communicate acquired knowledge, capacity to identify problems and research topics as well as assessment of their relevance, capacity to identify and synthesize bibliographic information, and capacity to link philological knowledge to other disciplines. About the subject specific competences, we highlight the global development of communicative discursive competence in English by means of oral and conversational strategies as well as reading and writing strategies according to the different oral or written genres, development of perlocutionary and argumentative capacity in English.

Results and Discussion

Students present their academic works orally at the end of the academic year. In this subject we have 26

students enrolled. The teacher provided appropriate instructions to the subject during the first weeks of class. They may also develop a presentation of their work through poster sessions or any other visual tool, which will be presented and defended publicly.

All students (in this subject we have 26 students enrolled) defended their work using either PowerPoint by Microsoft or Prezi including audio, videos, and pictures in their presentations.

As a student was defending the work, their partners were observing as they had to fulfil a questionnaire about the presentation. All our students participated in the questionnaires (in total, each student had to fulfil 25 questionnaires).

Students took into account many different items to include in their answers such as the presentation was too long, or bored, or the attitude of the speaker in front of an audience (body movement, nervousness, eye contact, etc.); but we only paid attention to the answers related exclusively to the use of visual aids in the presentation; for this paper, we have analyzed the answers to the question: "How do you suggest this presentation could be improved?"

The result can be divided in positive and negative reviews. The positive opinions were closely related to the whole structure, design, and organization of the whole oral presentation. In general, students prepared good works and their classmates so noted on the questionnaire.

We have classified the negative opinions as follows: (1) about the text; (2) about the design (video and audio); and (3) about the user.

About the Text

The main negative reviews were about: (1) grammatical issues: Students were critical in this aspect and they pointed the grammatical mistakes in their classmates' presentations; (2) too many words in the slides: Students indicated the excessive use of words in one slide; (3) too much theory: Students complaint about the excessive time devoted to theory as presentations were intended to show the practical part of the topics; and (4) the form of the text: Some students complained about the impossibility of reading the text as the color of the text.

About the first item of review (text), we can conclude that the presenters should pay more attention to the grammatical and typological mistakes on their slides. The fact of using visual aids means that the audience will be just as aware of your words as the visual resources; therefore, presenters should care more this important issue and review the text before submission. On the other hand, it should be also noted that, sometimes, the presenters forget that visual resources are used to assist the presentation, in any case, can replace any aspect. The act of writing too many words on a slide makes visually unattractive and otherwise, and is not intended to replace our words by the printed text. And finally, regarding the reviews about the use of specific type of text on the slides, we have to point out that according to Wax (2011), we have to pay attention to design, focusing on avoiding the temptation to dress up our pages with cheesy effects and focus instead on simple design basics such as the use a sans serif font for body text. The use of decorative fonts is *only* for slide headers, and then *only* when they are easy to read. We have to put dark text on a light background and align text left or right and finally we must avoid clutter. As Wax (2011) said: "Your slides are the *illustrations* for your presentation, *not* the presentation itself. They should underline and reinforce what you're saying as you give your presentation" (p. 24). Downey (2007), from the Learning Centre at the University of New South Wales also reinforced these points in an oral presentation using PowerPoint:

- (1) Help you cover more ground in less time;
- (2) Link the sections of your presentation;
- (3) Illustrate factors which are difficult to explain or time-consuming to describe;
- (4) Show reality in ways that words alone cannot (photographs, plans, and maps);
- (5) Help the audience visualise abstract concepts (charts, diagrams, and conceptual visuals);
- (6) Summarise information (keywords, graphs, and tables);
- (7) Make a dry subject interesting.

About the Design

Concerning design, what students complained mostly about was in three clear aspects: (1) the organization of the visuals; (2) too many videos: If we take into account that a presentation lasted 30 minutes, there was a student who included five videos which lasted 2/3 minutes each; and (3) the quality of the visual resources.

After having seen the results, we conclude that students' main complaint was about the excessive and many times unnecessary use of videos and the quality of them. We have to be aware and so our students that including visual aids in the presentations can be many times useful in order to better organize the presentation, better explain our points and illustrate our text and words but, sometimes we risk abusing visual aids. We should choose the most appropriate ones and make sure we are not going to have glitches in the presentation.

About the User

Students also realized about "visuals design" problems using the resources. Students noted some kinds of inexperience in some of their classmates when using the visual resources and complained about this fact. This lack of technical skills can turn our presentation into a disaster. As we have commented in our introduction section, new technologies are invading our personal and academic lives, and both teachers and students have to accept it and work in the same direction.

About the user, and after the students' opinions, we can conclude that although few students showed some difficulties when using the technical support, most of them were well prepared in this issue.

References

- Digital Literacy European Commission. (2008). Digital literacy report: A review for the i2010 eInclusion Initiative. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/i2010/docs/digital_literacy/digital_literacy_review.pdf
- Downey, T. L. (2007). Using PowerPoint in oral presentations. The Learning Centre, the University of New South Wales. Retrieved from <http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/ppoint.html>
- Lai, W., Berg, D., & McDonald, F. (2010). Establishing an online peer-support and mentoring community for international students: Some cultural and design considerations. Retrieved from <http://cs.anu.edu.au/iojs/index.php/ifip/article/viewFile/13532/461>
- Luzón, M. J., Ruiz-Madrid, M. N., & Villanueva, M. L. (2010). *Digital genres, new literacies and autonomy in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- McLoughlin, C., & Lee, M. J. W. (2008). The three P's of pedagogy for the networked society: Personalization, participation, and productivity. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(1), 10-27.
- Tíscar, L. (2009). The role of the university in the construction of the digital identity (El papel de la Universidad en la construcción de su identidad digital). *Digital culture and creative practices in education (Cultura digital y prácticas creativas en educación)*. *University and Knowledge Society Journal*, 6(1).
- UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). (2004). Information and communication technologies in the teaching and learning of foreign languages: State-of-the-art, needs and perspectives. Retrieved from <http://iite.unesco.org/pics/publications/en/files/3214627.pdf>
- Wax, D. (2011). 10 tips for more effective PowerPoint presentations. Retrieved from <http://www.lifehack.org/articles/technology/10-tips-for-more-effective-powerpoint-presentations.html>

Appendix: Oral Presentations

Students have to take an oral exam which represents the 50% of their final mark.

Oral presentations can be made individually (20 to 30 minutes) or in pairs (30 to 40 minutes).

Presentations can be made in three different ways:

Option 1: Choose a topic and develop it (research and/or linguistic analysis on genre and register).

Option 2: Choose different topics (research and /or linguistic analysis on genre and register):

Example 1: Start with introducing English as a Lingua Franca (units 1 and 17), focus on business English (articles from units 1 and 17), and then finish with a specific topic such as cold calling (unit 3 extra topic).

Example 2: Unit 3 Making Calls, Unit 5 Handling calls and finish researching on ending calls.

Option 3: Suggest a different topic from those on the list (research and /or linguistic analysis on genre and register).

Oral presentations guidelines:

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lionline/quickrefs/11-oral-presentations.xml> (brief and practical)

http://people.engr.ncsu.edu/txie/publications/oral_presentation_skills.pdf (long and detailed)

After a short period of research, here are some of the resources you can use if you decide to work on related-to-unit topics.

There are also two extra topics.

UNITS 1 and 17. International English and Global Village

Short articles:

<http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/59/4/339.full.pdf>

<http://ressources-cla.univ-fcomte.fr/gerflint/Europe3/hulmbauer.pdf>

<http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/BreidbachEN.pdf>

http://www.davidcrystal.com/DC_articles/English52.pdf

Long articles and books:

http://www.sprachshop.com/sixcms/media.php/811/English_as_a_grobal_lang_sample_ch.pdf

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-research-english-next.pdf>

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-elt-future.pdf>

UNIT 2. Making Contacts

Short articles:

<http://www.paulmontelongo.com/articles/strategies.html>

<http://www.zeromillion.com/business/meeting-greeting.html>

<http://www.evancarmichael.com/Business-Coach/223/Powerful-Strategies-For-Meeting-And-Greeting-People-From-Your-Strategic-Thinking-Business-Coach.html>

UNIT 3. Making Calls

Short articles:

<http://blog.lingoking.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/How-to-make-a-business-phone-call-in-English1.pdf>

Extra topic: Cold Calling

Short articles:

<http://www.helpcoldcall.com/>

<http://wisemansay.co.uk/2010/11/cold-call-dead-implications-recruitment-job-search/>

http://www.businessballs.com/cold_calling.htm

Long articles:

<http://www.freebooksforall.com/ColdCalling.pdf>

UNIT 4. Handling Calls

Short articles:

<http://www.callcentrehelper.com/10-tips-to-improve-call-handling-performance-by-30-11389.htm>

<http://sbinfocanada.about.com/cs/timemanagement/a/telephonetips1.htm>

http://sbinfocanada.about.com/cs/timemanagement/a/telephonetips1_2.htm

<http://sbinfocanada.about.com/cs/timemanagement/a/telephonetips2.htm>

http://sbinfocanada.about.com/cs/timemanagement/a/telephonetips2_2.htm

UNIT 5. Extra topic: Social Networks and business English

<http://www.businessknowhow.com/tips/networking.htm>

<http://www.rileyguide.com/nettips.html>