

# Factors Affecting Oral Presentations of the Second-Year English Majors at Hanoi University of Industry

**Nhung Nguyen Thi Phuong**

Fundamental Faculty, Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam

## Abstract

The study is concerned with factors affecting oral presentation skills of the second-year English majors at Hanoi University of Industry in the classroom setting. The research aims at finding out the students' perceptions of oral presentation skills, their self-evaluations of their presentations, and factors affecting their performances. A questionnaire and class observations were carried out to get data for analysis. The total of 82 second-year English majors of three classes at Hanoi University of Industry participated in this study. The research reveals that the students' low oral proficiency, their high level of anxiety, and inadequate support and feedback from teachers contributed to their unsuccessful presentations. Based on these findings, the study offers some recommendations for both students and teachers to improve the students' presentation skills.

## Keywords

Oral presentations, second-year English majors, oral proficiency, anxiety, teachers' feedback

## I. Introduction

Making oral presentations brings students a lot of benefits which are bridging the gap between language study and language use, using the four language skills in a naturally integrated way, helping students to collect, inquire, organize and construct information, enhancing team work, and helping students become active and autonomous learners. As a matter of fact, a language learner's ability to present in the target language is dependent on a number of factors related to both their knowledge of the language systems (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) and their personality traits such as timidity or self-confidence. To get the best presentation result, students need to master a wide range of skills and techniques such as the use of language, the way to organize all ideas, the ability to speak clearly and confidently, and the use of body language.

Giving effective presentations is quite challenging for many second-year English majors at Hanoi University of Industry. Although some students spend much time and effort on their oral presentations, they do not get the intended outcomes. They have a lot of ideas, but they do not perform well in the class to attract the audience's attention. Other students try to get through the ordeal as quickly as possible, as the result, their public speaking skills do not improve much. These problems are the motivation for the researcher to carry out the study on factors affecting oral presentations of the second-year English majors at Hanoi University of Industry.

## II. Literature Review

### 1. Oral presentations

Oral presentations can be defined as brief discussions of a focused topic delivered to a group of listeners in order to impart knowledge or to stimulate discussion. They are similar to short papers with an introduction, main body and conclusion (Ohio Wesleyan University). They are classified into different types due to their modes of delivery and purposes. In terms of delivering modes, Dwyer, as in [5], gives five forms of presentations or speeches which are impromptu speech, manuscript speech, memorized speech, briefing, and team briefing.

Comfort (1995), as in [4], identifies things that make a presentation effective are as below:

Over all:

- awareness of the audience
- clear objectives

System:

- planning – have a clear structure and a sense of timing
- organization – have clear connections between the different parts or ideas
- information – make sure that it is interesting and relevant to the audience
- impact – make sure to have a strong introduction and conclusions

Delivery:

- clear, simple, and fluent
- use of natural spoken language
- use of pauses for emphasis

Body language:

- use of strong, clear gestures for emphasis
- good eye contact with the audience
- positive, confident, and relaxed manner
- no distracting gestures

Visual aids:

- clear and simple messages
- efficient, professional use of equipment

### 2. Oral presentations in the language classroom

In the language classroom setting, making presentations is an important kind of activity. If properly guided and organized, oral presentations provide a learning experience and lifelong skills that will be beneficial to students in all school subjects as well as later in their careers. They can improve not only their speaking ability in the target language but also other sub-skills like outlining a talk, organizing ideas, dealing with questions, etc. Students can give a speech on a topic of their own choice or given by the teacher. Such talks are subject matter oriented, prepared and "writing like".

Underhill (1987), as in [20], suggests mini-presentations may be a routine part of the daily language teaching and learning schedule. Each day one student in turn makes his presentation lasting from five to ten minutes to the rest of the class. He is expected to refer to notes; but reading aloud is strongly

discouraged. The use of simple aids such as an overhead projector, black board or flipchart diagrams is encouraged if appropriate. At the end of the presentation, the speaker is expected to deal with any questions related to the topic. When this procedure has been established, the whole activity, from introducing the speaker at the beginning to the final summary, can be conducted by the students without the intervention of the teacher. He also states that choosing the topic is very important. "It should be relevant to the aims of the program or the needs of the learners and should contain new information or put over a new viewpoint. It should not be so specialized that only the speaker himself is interested, nor should it be so general that it has no apparent purpose other than a long exercise. Ideally, the topic should be chosen by the learner in consultation with his teacher who will help match the ability of the learner with the difficulty of a given topic".

Vo (1994), as in [21], recommends the following procedure for the teachers to assign oral presentations:

1. At the beginning of the term, announce to the students that they all will have an opportunity to speak in front of the group.
2. Put up a large calendar so that students can pick up the date they prefer.
3. After the break of every class session, have one student come forward and speak about the topic he or she chose.
4. During the speech, sit in the audience.
5. Have each student speak for about five minutes.
6. Have the other class members hold their questions and comments until the speaker has finished.
7. After each speech, give the speaker some feedback.

In short, oral presentation skills are extremely important so as to help students practice using the language and develop the ability to speak to an audience which is necessary for them in the future.

### 3. Factors affecting oral presentation skills

Students' language proficiency is one of the factors contributing to the success or the failure of an oral presentation. Language proficiency is the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language. "Proficiency ranges from zero to native – like. Complete competence is hardly ever reached by second language learners", as in [19]. The grading criteria for assessing English speaking proficiency are pronunciation (intonation, word stress, and sentence stress), fluency, and accuracy (grammar and vocabulary).

Another factor is related to students' personality traits. In the classroom, students with different characteristics, especially different levels of anxiety and confidence, may result in different levels of success, as in [17]. Many researchers agree that feelings of anxiety, apprehension and nervousness are commonly expressed by learners in learning to speak a foreign language, particularly when they have to make an oral presentation. King (2002), as in [10], considers speech anxiety is one of the major problems leading to learners' oral presentation failures. This anxiety comes in part from a lack of confidence in the general linguistic knowledge, the embarrassment of exposing the language imperfections in front of others. Besides, learners' personality traits such as shyness, quietness, and reticence are considered to frequently precipitate communication apprehension. It is obvious that such feelings in the learners may prevent them from achieving the desired

goal.

King (2002) also emphasizes that working with students on oral presentations is a challenging job for teachers because it involves training in speech communication and public speaking disciplines, which demands more of teachers in terms of time and effort in lesson planning and teaching strategies. Furthermore, the importance of creating a supportive learning atmosphere, acquiring interaction skills, incorporating project work, developing cooperative learning skills and applying technology in enhancing teachers' facilitative skills should be emphasized. The teacher is the guide, organizer, consultant, resource person, and supporter. The teacher's role in oral presentations not only involves preparing detailed guidelines, organizing groups, helping students to select topics, guiding their research and helping them learn the use of various visual aids, but also holding of Question & Answer sessions, providing feedback and evaluating their performances.

## III. Methodology

### 1. Objectives

The specific objectives of the study include:

- Identifying the students' perceptions of the importance of oral presentation skills.
- Understanding how students evaluate their oral presentations.
- Examining the factors affecting their oral presentations.

### 2. Research questions

The questions below must be answered:

1. What are the second-year English major students' perceptions of the importance of oral presentation skills?
2. How do they assess their oral presentations?
3. What factors affect their oral presentations?

### 2. Participants

This research was carried out with the participation of 82 students of three classes, DHTA1, DHTA2 and DHTA3 (27, 27, and 28 students respectively). This was also the total number of the second-year English majors at Hanoi University of Industry. They were having the fourth term with 15 weeks of studying. In this term, they had to give at least two presentations, one in the first seven weeks and the other in the rest. Few students had excellent results of the previous English final – term tests. Especially, their speaking marks were not very high, varying from 5 to 9. 11 students (13%) got mark 5, 21 students (26%) got mark 6, 42 students (51%) got mark 7, 7 students (9%) got mark 8 and only 1 student (1%) got mark 9 (according to the marking system of 1 – 10).

### 3. Data collection instruments

#### Instrument 1: Survey questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was delivered to 82 second-year English majors at midterm to collect data in quantitative form for analysing, summarizing and reporting. All questions were adapted from various sources (as in [4], [7], [15]) and based on the researcher's experience. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was about students' final speaking mark in the third semester, their attitudes toward the importance of oral presentation skills and their evaluations of their presentation performances. The second part included questions concerning the factors affecting their oral presentations in the classroom.

**Instrument 2: Class observation**

The researcher observed two presentations in class DHTA1 and DHTA3 to check the reliability of the data collected. The reason that the researcher did not choose DHTA2 was class 1 and 2 were working with the same teacher. The observation form was adapted from Reinhart, as in [15].

**IV. Findings and Discussion**

**1. Results of the questionnaire**

**Students' perceptions of oral presentation skills**

The first question was designed to find out students' awareness of the importance of presentation skills. Five responses, namely, "Very Important", "Important", "Neutral", "Unimportant", and "Very Unimportant" were given.

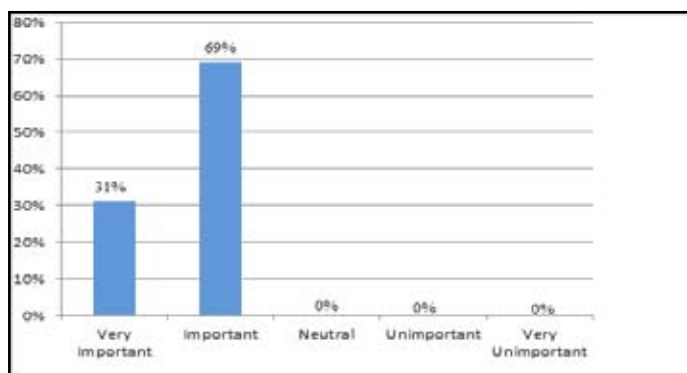


Fig. 1: Students' perceptions of oral presentation skills

The chart shows that "Very Important" and "Important" were students' only two choices out of the five given. It proves 100% of students agreed on the importance of oral presentation skills. Being aware of this, students might really want to have as many chances to practice these skills in the class as possible since it was their teachers and friends who would listen to their presentations and had some comments to help them improve their presentation skills.

**Students' self-evaluations of their presentations**

Participants were asked to rate the success of their presentations which were made in the first seven weeks of the term.

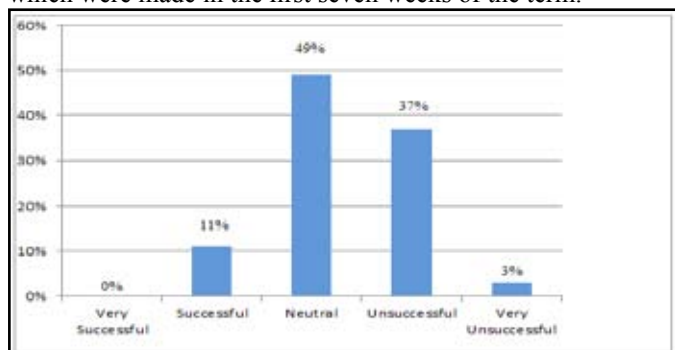


Fig. 2: Students' self-evaluation of their presentations

It can be seen from the chart, most of the students expressed their lack of satisfaction with their presentations. They admitted that their presentations were unsuccessful or very unsuccessful (40%) and neutral (49%). Only 11% of the participants (9 out of 82) thought they delivered presentations successfully.

**Factors affecting the students' oral presentations**

To find out the factors that led to their unsuccessful presentations in English, a list of items related to language proficiency were designed. The level of language difficulty was taken into consideration with five responses – "Very Difficult", "Difficult", "Neutral", "Easy", and "Very Easy". Scores of 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 were given to these choices, respectively. The result was measured by mean scores to compare with the standard average value of 3.

Table 1: Students' difficulties in terms of language

Items	Mean scores
1. Having appropriate usage of vocabulary and structures	2.8
2. Using signposting language to organize your presentations	2.9
3. Having almost no grammatical errors in your presentations	3.7
4. Giving presentations clearly with correct pronunciation	4.2
5. Delivering presentations fluently	4.7
6. Having proper pauses while delivering presentations	4.0
7. Stressing words correctly and properly	4.4
8. Delivering presentations with proper intonation patterns	4.5

It can be easily seen from the table the mean scores of 6 out of 8 items were higher than the standard average. This proves that a large number of students considered items 3-8 very difficult or difficult. Students thought that delivering the presentations fluently was the most challenging. While speaking, they often used a lot of hesitation fillers like "ahh", "er", or "uuhmm" because they forgot what to say next. The other items of high difficulty level were intonation, stress, pronunciation, and chunking techniques, which reflects their low oral proficiency. This can be explained by their lack of practice. When they were at high school, they paid much attention to doing grammatical exercises and had very little time for speaking skills. During the first year at university, they spent much more time practicing short utterances to maintain a conversation with their friends than producing long ones or a speech. Items 1 and 2, having appropriate usage of vocabulary and structures and using signposting language to organize the presentations, were the least difficult for the second-year majors with the mean scores were 2.8 and 2.9 respectively (below the standard one). The reason for this was that almost students copied the language from the reading materials. Moreover, they had much time to prepare and to work in group, so they could help each other to adapt the written language to the proper spoken style. As stated in the literature review, students' personality, especially their anxiety, has a great influence on the results of presentations. Some items below concerning this factor were given to see how anxious students were. The 5-point Likert scale was also applied with "Strongly Agree", "Agree", "Neutral", "Disagree", and "Strongly Disagree" choices for each statement.

Table 2: Students' personal characteristics

Items	Mean scores
1. I always feel nervous when speaking in front of a group.	3.9
2. I am concerned that my presentation is worse than others'.	3.5
3. I'm worried that other students won't understand me because of my pronunciation.	3.9
4. I am afraid that I will not be able to express myself clearly.	3.8
5. I worry that the other students will be bored because of my presenting manner.	3.6

It is noticeable from table 2 that most students lacked self-confidence which is defined as "having no doubts about your ability or knowledge to do something". All mean scores were more than 3, which indicates their high level of anxiety about their ability to deliver good presentations. The reasons, as the researcher believed, were their limited language proficiency and presenting experience.

Besides students' language proficiency and characteristics, another factor examined was the teachers' role. As mentioned earlier, students came from three classes, DHTA1, DHTA2, and DHTA3 with different teachers responsible for their speaking lessons. Students were asked if their teachers had the following activities or not. The responses were calculated in percentage.

Table 3: Students' reflection to their teachers' activities

Activities	Yes	No
1. Suggesting students some themes	100%	0%
2. Helping students to choose the suitable topics	20%	80%
3. Providing students with language for a presentation	100%	0%
4. Providing students with model presentations, analysing verbal and non-verbal language used	100%	0%
5. Giving students the clear evaluation form	0%	100%
6. Having serious facial expression when students are delivering the presentation	65%	35%
7. Showing some encouraging signs such as nodding, friendly – smiles, ...	28%	72%
8. Always praising students for some good points when they finish the presentation	21%	79%
9. Giving detailed comments on presenting manner, language usage, body language, slide display, and timing...	39%	61%
210. Giving marks	100%	0%

All students from three classes (100%) said that their teachers always suggested some themes for their presentations which were adapted from the textbooks for the second-year majors. Students, then, chose topics of their interest related to the given themes for presenting. They all were also provided with language for presenting and model presentations, which were definitely necessary for them in the preparation stage. However, no student had the clear evaluation form in advanced, which made students uncertain about how their presentations would

be assessed. While they were presenting, only 28% of the students realized encouraging signs from the teachers but 65% saw teachers' serious facial expression. And after presenting, only 21% got praises for their good points and 39% received detailed comments. It is obvious that students were not provided proper encouragement, adequate support and feedback from the teachers to help them perform better.

## 2. Results of class observation

The researcher wanted to have more reliable affirmation about the students' language proficiency and the teachers' feedback, so two groups' presentations (DHTA1 and DHTA3) were observed.

The first observation was taken from class DHTA1 with a presentation of two students on "*Advantages and Disadvantages of Trial Marriages*". After introducing themselves, the two presenters asked the audience some questions related to marriage customs in Vietnam. The audience gave the answers with great enthusiasm. Then, the presenters asked for the listeners' opinions about living together without wedding ceremony. After getting some short responses, they showed their first slide on which there was their topic for presenting. By doing this, they got the audience involved in their presentation and had good interaction with them. Each student was responsible for presenting a part. The two presenters were very good at giving arguments and a lot of supporting examples. However, they made so many long sentences and unfamiliar words that listeners had to try very hard to understand their explanations. The first presenter could speak a little more fluently than the second one who also had problems with pronunciation. She mispronounced some words, for example, illegitimate, legal ... Both of them had monotonous voice and they had problems with "speaking with emphasis" and "varying their voice" which were important to attract listeners' attention. Moreover, some grammatical mistakes occurred on the slides which were not well-designed and overcrowded with words. The presenters chose colorful background which made it difficult to see all words clearly. In fact, these could be avoided if the teacher made some notes on slide designing. While presenting, the presenters had some pictures to illustrate their ideas, which should have been very useful. But their ability to refer to visual aids was not good enough; they just showed pictures to the audience without any comments. At the end of the presentation, the audience gave the two presenters a lot of questions as this was an interesting topic for all, but they did not deal with those questions effectively. It seemed that their lack of vocabulary prevented them from expressing clearly what they had in their mind. While students were presenting, the teacher sat at the back. As the researcher observed, hardly did she show any encouragement towards the presenters. Before giving them marks, the teacher gave some feedback in which she praised them for choosing a "hot topic" to attract other students' attention. She also focused on the words that both pronounced inaccurately. Notably, she had no advice on their slide designing which needed modifying to have a better presentation. Two presenters got marks 7 and 6.

The second observation was taken from class DHTA3. Two presenters made an oral presentation on "*Quan Ho Folk Song in Viet Nam*". At first, they played a Quan Ho song which gave the audience a moment of relaxation and let listeners guess the topic of their presentation. Right from the start, they showed the listeners the organization of their talk to make it easier

to follow. However, their presentation was not successful because of their low voice quality, mispronunciation and unsuitable body language. The first presenter spoke so softly that it was very difficult for people sitting at the back to catch her words. She read the transcript a lot, as the result, she did not have much interaction with the audience. The second one also had some problems. She spoke too slowly and had pauses in places where they were not helpful to the listeners. While delivering the presentation, both of them did not have friendly facial expression, they seemed to be so anxious and strained. One of them did not have good eye-contact with all members of the audience but only a group of the students who always sat near her in the class. The reason of this problem, as the researcher believed, was that looking at close friends could help the presenter feel more confident. In the presentation, some new words about Quan Ho clothes, musical instruments, performing customs were not explained or illustrated clearly. When giving feedback, the teacher focused on the importance of explaining new words to the listeners and corrected some words mispronounced. However, she did not place great weight on voice volume and eye – contact which the two presented should pay much more attention to so that they could do better next time. Both of them got mark 6.5 for their presentation. In conclusion, both presentations were unsuccessful because the presenters lacked ability to speak clearly and fluently. They all looked anxious and unconfident. The teachers did not give them very detailed feedback on their presenting techniques which was very useful to improve their presentation skills.

## V. Recommendations

### 1. Recommendations for students

In order to become effective presenters, it is necessary for students to set up good speaking habits by practising. Careful preparation and practice can help students improve their oral proficiency and gain confidence to have a successful presentation. Four steps in the preparation stage are writing the presentation, rewriting it for ear, practicing and revising it, and organizing the visual aids, as in [5]. The main aim of writing and rewriting the speech is to organize it in a logical sequence and suitable spoken language. Then, it is necessary for the presenters to practice the speech. Many second-year majors need to improve their voice quality which involves attention to volume, speed and fluency, clarity and pronunciation. The quality of their voice in a presentation will improve dramatically if they are able to practise beforehand in a room similar to the one they will be presenting in. It is better if they can record the speech either on audio- or videotape and evaluate themselves. By videoing their performance, they can observe their non-verbal communication, they can decide how loudly or softly they want to speak, where they want to emphasize and how long the presentation will take. In addition, students should be good audience to evaluate the others' presentations as they can learn a lot by watching others speaking. According to many educational experts, peer assessment highlights learner autonomy as each student takes responsibility for his or her own active learning. By taking part in peer evaluation activities, learners gain a firm knowledge of the form and process of what makes an effective presentation.

### 2. Recommendations for teachers

Firstly, teachers should provide students with a wide range of activities focused on both verbal and non-verbal language. In terms of language proficiency, especially pronunciation, stress and intonation, teachers can ask students to listen to audio files and pay attention to the pauses, stress, the rise or fall of the speaker's voice. After that, students will repeat and copy the rhythm of these words, sentences even paragraphs many times. Their ability to speak with articulation, to have appropriate pauses and intonation will improve. In terms of non-verbal skills, teachers should take time to demonstrate how and when to use body language including eye contact, gestures, posture, and facial expression. Moreover, teachers should create a supportive learning atmosphere, encourage students to contact the teachers if they run into any problems; for example, difficulties pronouncing words or organising their ideas. Teachers also need to give some encouragement to those who are making a real effort, not just to those who are the most successful. This sometimes can be done simply by a nod while students are making presentations. Finally, the evaluation form should be given to students when teachers assign the task. It can be used as a guideline for students to prepare their presentations. In this way, students are informed in advance of the criteria by which their presentations will be evaluated. Teachers' detailed feedback on each presentation may be based on these criteria as well.

## VI. Conclusion

The study focuses on the second-year English majors at Hanoi University of Industry in order to identify factors which affect their oral presentations in the classroom. The researcher did a survey questionnaire and observed classes to achieve the aim. The major findings are all students were well aware of the importance of oral presentation skills, most of them thought they did not succeed in making oral presentations, and factors such as their low oral proficiency, their anxiety and lack of adequate support from the teacher affected their presentations. Based on the findings, some recommendations for both teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning oral presentation skills have been offered. For teachers, it is necessary for them to help students improve both linguistic and nonlinguistic skills and build up their confidence. For students, they need to improve their knowledge of the target language, have thorough preparation for each presentation and know how to learn from their previous presentations and their peer's. To conclude, oral presentation skills are very important for students, especially in their future jobs. Becoming effective presenters is not easy at all; therefore, the more students practice, the better their presentations are.

## References

- [1] Brown, P. (2005). "Student Presentations". *Mordern English Teacher*, 14 (2), 42 – 43.
- [2] Bygate, M. (1987). *Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Byrne, D. (1986). *Techniques for Classroom Interaction*. London: Longman.
- [4] Comfort, J. (1995). *Effective Presentations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [5] Dwyer, J. (2000). *The Business Communication Handbook*.

- New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- [6] Ellis, M & O'Driscoll, N. (1992). *Giving Presentations*. Hong Kong: Longman.
- [7] Emden, J & Becker, L (2004). *Presentation Skills for Students*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [8] Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and Learning in the Language Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Horwitz, E & Cope, J. (1986). *Foreign Language Anxiety*. *Modern Language Journal*.
- [10] King, J. (2002). *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. VIII, No3, March 2002.
- [11] Klippel, F. (1985). *Communicative Fluency Activities for Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [12] Nunan, D. (2003). *Deigning Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Pattison, P. (1987). *Developing Communication Skills*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Powell, M. (2003). *Presenting in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [15] Reinhart, S.M. (2002). *Giving Academic Presentations*. The University of Michigan Press.
- [16] Scharle, A & Szabo, A. (2000). *Learner Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [17] Scovel, T. (1978). *The Effect on Foreign Language Learning: A Review of Anxiety Research Language Learning*. Vol 27, No 1.
- [18] Spielberger, C. (1983). *Manxual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory*. Palo Alto, California.
- [19] Stern, H. (1992). *Issues and Options in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [20] Underhill, N. (1987). *Testing Spoken Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [21] Vo, G. (1994). *New Ways in Teaching Speaking* (pp. 276-277).