

The Power to Make a Point: Investigating the Students' Use of PowerPoint

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To Cite this Source:

Bensal, E. R., Miraflores, E. S., Misolas, C., & Tan, N. C. (2010, December 2). Gotcha Pecha Kucha: Innovating Student Classroom Presentation [Paper Presentation]. *The 4th Globalization and Localization in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (GLoCALL) International Conference*, Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

Abstract

In the context of modern presentations, the audience has become visual learners and listeners; hence, speakers are compelled to design visual aids to enhance their presentations which make the Powerpoint the most commonly used media to achieve this purpose. However, some speakers have the proclivity to depend too much on their Powerpoint presentations, thereby relegating their role as presenters to the background. This paper investigates select students' efficiency in managing their Powerpoint presentations in their English for Communication (ENGLCOM) classes at De La Salle University-Manila, and its pedagogical implications in the teaching of oral presentation. This paper covers how the students use technology to complement the content of their report. From this, the study shows that the majority of the student presenters failed to communicate effectively as they depend too much on their Powerpoint presentation (e.g. too much reading, too much number of slides, heavy text information, over emphasis on animation and irrelevant graphics). Therefore, there is a need for the students to understand that although the Powerpoint is an important tool, it is not the alternative for a powerful presentation. Powerpoint is one of the best presentation software applications that can help students be better presenters given the right training and exposure, in order for them to have the power to make a point.

Introduction

PowerPoint is a ubiquitous and influential communications technology as it could aid presentations in various disciplines like management communications, information systems, business, economics, accounting, medicine, education and so on. According to the study conducted by Berlin and Associates, PowerPoint was the well-liked and most accepted means (software) for computer based training applications (as cited in Keefe & Willett, 2004). In line with this, there are already lists of researchers who have been studying this type of presentation media, such as Bradley, Mbarika, Sankar, Raju, & Bangaly (2007) in information systems, Beets & Lobingier (2001) and Sugahara & Boland (2006) in accounting, Williams (2004) in management communication, Rankin & Hoaas (2001) in economics, and James, Burke, & Hutchins (2006) in business courses (as cited in Burke, James, & Ahmadi, 2009).

Indeed, the use of technology in the form of PowerPoint has been widespread for more than ten years now. Simons's (2005) presented in his report that each day there is an estimation of more than 20 million copies of PowerPoint-based presentations being distributed. They are exponentially increasing; thereby, setting the whole world in the mood that if one presided a meeting without PowerPoint, it is ostentatious and undesirable. Additionally, in the higher education institutions, a faculty member who does not use PowerPoint in his lecture may "sometimes seen as a mark of seniority" (Parker, 2001, p. 6, citing a conversation with Stanford University Professor Clifford Nass as cited in Craig & Amernic, 2006) and ineffectiveness.

PowerPoint may really be a useful supplemental tool for a presentation as it could assist the presenters, guide the audience, facilitate understanding, and stimulate more senses. Van Jole (2000) even describes it as "the Viagra of the spoken word and a wonder pill for flabby lectures." However, PowerPoint should not serve as a substitute to the presentation, or else the dynamics of interaction is blatantly abused and misused. "At a minimum, a presentation format should do no harm. Yet the PowerPoint style routinely disrupts, dominates, and trivializes content. Thus, PowerPoint presentations too often resemble a school play—very loud, very slow, and very simple" (Tufte, 2003, ¶ 9, as cited in Burke, James, & Ahmadi, 2009). Therefore this "Viagra-

wonder-pill” drug may infuse negative side effects like idiocy, boredom, “wasted time, and downgraded ... quality and credibility of communication” (Tufte, 2003a, ¶ 1). As Adams (2006, cited in Vallance & Towndrow, 2007) attempted to show in his study, slide show software on the hand of an untrained presenter may “reshape knowledge in particular ways to the detriment of analytical thinking and interpretive understanding.”

If training and exposing students on how to properly use Powerpoint in presenting a report will be neglected, an immense problem in communication may be imminent, especially with technology-enhanced environments being evident in almost all classrooms and presentation halls around the globe. Surprisingly, there are even presenters in conferences who turn their backs, stare at the slides, and read the text verbatim without looking at the audience (Voss, 2004). Compounding these negative tendencies are the tediously long texts in a slide, use of festively colorful font styles and slides, inclusion of unnecessary animations and the like. One should learn to draw the limitations of overly-using PowerPoint and have the power to actually make a point. Simply, “If your words or images are not on point, making them dance in color won't make them relevant. Audience boredom is usually a content failure, not a decoration failure” (Tufte, 2003b). In order to remedy this presentation faux pas, the students who would soon be in their respective fields should be trained well on the use of PowerPoint as a visual aid and in delivering effective presentations.

In De La Salle University-Manila, undergraduate students enroll in English Communication (ENGLCOM), a pre-requisite to other English courses, which primarily deals with reading and writing competencies during their freshman year. Students learn specifically about presentation skills much later, typically in their third year of study, as they take Speech and Communication (SPEECOM) classes, the third in a series of required general education English courses. However, students are often expected to create PowerPoint presentations and deliver reports as a major requirement in various core and general education subjects as early as their first term in their first year in the university. It is commonly believed that students already possess the knowledge and skills necessary to create a meaningful presentation regardless of having taken the SPEECOM course or not, or whether presentation skills in the course curriculum are

included or not. Because of this belief, many students are unprepared, inconsistent, and ineffective in their presentations.

To shed further light in this aspect, this paper then attempts to discover the common weaknesses of first year ENGLCOM students in presenting a report using PowerPoint. This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are common features of freshmen students' PowerPoint presentations?
2. What common weaknesses in presentation skills were exhibited by students in presenting their reports?
3. What are the implications of these results to the teaching of presentation skills and the creation of PowerPoint presentations?

Methodology

Materials

This study used the oral presentations and Power Point materials prepared by ENGLCOM students for their report on ten logical fallacies. The selection of the Power Point presentations was based on the premise that a computer, a software program and downloaded materials from the Internet will be utilized in its preparation.

Instruments

The researchers created a rubric for evaluating the oral presentations and the Power Point materials. Each pair of presenters was evaluated by their peers and by their ENGLCOM teacher. Specifically, the oral report and the Power Point materials were evaluated based on the following criteria: Visual Aids, Organization, Content and Delivery (Nonverbal and Verbal). The following range of scores with a corresponding qualitative description was used to rate the each criteria: Limited 0-8 points, Acceptable 9-16 points and Proficient 17-25 points.

Participants

The participants were 80 first year college students from four English 1 (ENGLCOM) classes in De La Salle University-Manila. Each class had an average of 20 students each and had a mix of male and female students from different colleges.

Procedure

1. The teacher prepared pieces of paper on which was written one logical fallacy. The assignment of the fallacy to be discussed by each pair was determined through the drawing of lots.
2. Each class was instructed that an oral presentation had to be made about logical fallacies. The students were paired off, each was given a free hand to choose his/her partner
3. One week prior to the presentation, the pairs were instructed and were fully briefed on how they were to be evaluated for the said task. Specific guidelines were discussed: the reports should be accompanied by a Power Point presentation and the length of each presentation was pegged at 7 minutes per pair. There was no limit set on the number of Power Point slides that can be used in the presentation. Only one class session was allotted for all the presentations.
4. At the end of each presentation, each pair was evaluated by the rest of the class and the teacher using the rubric provided for the activity.
5. The frequency count and average per criterion for both the peer and teacher evaluation was done for each pair. The overall and average score of each pair was likewise computed.
6. To lessen the possible teacher biases, all the four teachers watched the 80 speeches and evaluated them one by one to reach a consensus.

Results and Discussion

After all peer and teacher evaluation scores for all 80 presentations were averaged, it was observed that the average scores in all criteria do not drastically differ from one another. However, it can be noted that presenters were granted scores 2 to 4 points higher by their peers

than those given by teachers across all areas, thereby making the final score averages considerably distant. Several possibilities may explain this such as the possibility of students having personal biases or the inability to recognize the characteristics of an effective presentation. These may stem from the freshmen students' inexperience in the more formal atmosphere of a university as well as their lack of exposure to formal instruction on presentation skills. Although the students were given the rubric a week before their presentation, they still failed to properly deliver their reports in the areas covered by the rubric.

A. Common Features of Students' PowerPoint Presentations

A majority of the presentations contained 7-9 slides, an approximate of 1 or more slides per minute, which is quite excessive for a 7-minute presentation (Jones, 2003). Among the 448 comments independently listed by the instructors, 136 actually addressed concerns regarding the PowerPoint presentations of the student reporters. Most of which pertained to areas which needed much improvement particularly the use of lengthy texts in a slide, the inappropriate or inconsistent use of font sizes, styles and colors, the use of irrelevant graphics and effects, and the failure to integrate graphics in their presentations. However, on a more positive note, it was observed that many students used content-appropriate graphics, catchy videos and images, and attractive color schemes in their PowerPoint presentations.

Expectedly, students committed several oversights in the creation of their PowerPoint presentations especially that this particular lesson has not yet been taught explicitly. With these English 1 students being freshmen, their high school training regarding the use and conventions of PowerPoint, if any, obviously vary greatly. The most commonly observed weakness of slides containing much too lengthy texts was also a particularly expected one since students have a tendency to rely heavily on the words written on slides as guides, or worse, much to the detriment of effective communication with the audience. The inconsistent use of font sizes, styles and colors was also a great distraction to the audience since it did not help in giving emphasis to certain concepts or examples that needed focus.

Table 1. *Common Weaknesses Observed Among Student Presentations*

| Area | <i>Comments</i> | <i>F</i> |
|--------------|---|----------|
| Visual Aids | Contained lengthy texts | 39 |
| | Inconsistently used various font sizes, styles and colors | 19 |
| Organization | Lacked transition between concepts | 10 |
| | Had disorganized slides | 6 |
| Content | Needed further elaboration | 19 |
| | Gave incomplete or misleading information | 9 |
| Delivery | Constantly read from the Power Point presentation | 26 |
| | Lacked eye contact with audience | 9 |
| | Exhibited poor dynamics between partners | 9 |
| | Spoke too softly | 9 |
| | Habitually referred to cue cards | 8 |
| | Lacked variety in speaking tone | 8 |

Table 1 summarizes the most commonly observed weaknesses in the students' presentations with respect to the various criterion they were graded. As can be noted, the common weaknesses regarding slide preparation mentioned previously have great relevance to other aspects of the presenters' communication skills. Because students put almost all their texts in their slides, they were enslaved to read them and many, unsurprisingly, barely looked at their audience.

B. Common Weaknesses in Students' Presentation Skills

Apart from the lack of eye contact, another observed weakness was the poor dynamics between partners. There were instances of an apparent lack of coordination as to who would be presenting a particular aspect of the report and when the other partner would segue to the next point of the discussion. This may have affected the use of transitions which probably lead the audience to be improperly cued as to the progression of the report.

Another problematic area observed in the presentations was the apparent lack of substantial elaboration of the discussion points. While most of them cited excellent and appropriate examples and definitions, there was still a perceived weakness in the way the subject matter was handled. This was evident in several comments (both from teachers and student evaluators) regarding not only the lack of explanations but also in the disturbing fact that many students actually did not report complete or correct information.

These problems in presentation skills may have been due to the lack of training in terms of the basic guiding principles of effective communication in reports and presentations. Not excluding the students' individual personalities, some may not be as confident as others in making oral presentations.

C. Implications for Teaching

Presentation skills are indeed vital to every professional. Even though teachers could serve a model on how to use PowerPoint because everyday they are demonstrating their lessons in the class, it is still necessary that specific and direct lessons be allotted to teaching and honing students with the do's and don'ts in using PowerPoint presentation.

With freshmen students being asked to deliver reports in various core and general education classes regardless of not having received formal training on public speaking, presentation skills and PowerPoint creation in SPEECOM, there is a need to revisit the curriculum of the Basic English courses to include the said concepts in the first year. Although design perspectives may vary, a conventional guideline or modules addressing the specific concerns mentioned above regarding PowerPoint creation should also be considered for the needs of freshmen students. Since reporting tasks are periodically required from the students, perhaps a separate lesson on basic presentation skills may aid the students in their respective reports as well as prepare them for the more demanding presentation requirements in SPEECOM.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study would like to emphasize three major points:

1. Although the students were given the rubric a week before their presentation and they have prior experience presenting or reporting in front of the class, they still failed to properly deliver their reports.
2. Although students experienced creating PowerPoint and delivering reports several times, it does not automatically guarantee them to be prepared, consistent, and effective in their presentations.
3. Due to students lack of exposure to formal instruction on presentation skills, they have the tendency to be biased and to misinterpret the characteristics of an effective presentation.

Reference list is subject access request.