

Assessment of Oral Presentation Skills in Teaching English for Specific Purposes

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Abstract

Delivering an oral presentation requires mastery of all four language competencies. It also involves a thorough understanding of different linguistic registers and varieties. This involves focusing on non-verbal signs and gestures, with the precise aim of informing or persuading the audience. Therefore, evaluating these complex oral presentation skills can be challenging, especially if clear evaluation criteria are not established and followed through during the entire educational process.

Our study aims (1) to identify an extensive educational assessment tool for oral presentation skills, and (2) to test the validity of this tool among our students during formative evaluation sessions. Our study involves two groups of university undergraduate students learning English for Specific Purposes. They are from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, and the Technical University of Sofia, Bulgaria. Looking at the assessment intention from a communicative approach, in this research we stress the importance of the congruence between three educational stages – teaching, learning, and evaluation.

Keywords: *assessment, communication skills; oral presentation; ESP; evaluation instruments*

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Introduction. The assessment paradox

It is widely known that without proper evaluation and feedback, humans cannot evolve and correct or improve their doings and activities. However, if one is evaluated, unease and panic may occur. We call this phenomenon “the assessment paradox”. Evaluation is an utterly significant action, but most people would rather avoid it. Students share this opinion. As can be seen in the following images, an open

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questionnaire was addressed to gather students' views and feedback on their assessment experiences. Question Q5: "During your educational

During your educational journey, what emotions did you feel when you were evaluated or when you received feedback? [Copiați](#)

33 de răspunsuri

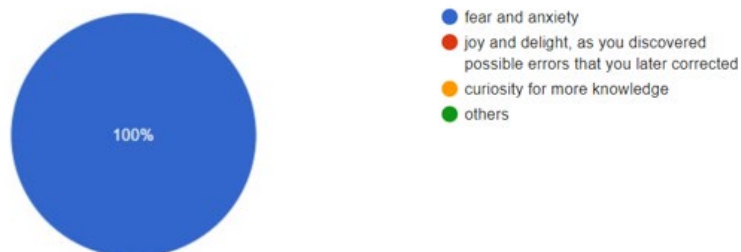


Figure 1. Gathering students' feedback on assessment; one single "blue" answer was received from a multiple choices answer type.

journey what experiences did you feel when you were evaluated?" received entirely "blue answers" – all students acknowledged that during the assessment they would feel "fear and anxiety". After applying several creative assessment methods during our foreign language classes, the same question received more colorful answers, such as "curiosity for more knowledge" or "joy and delight", as students managed to correct several errors.

Q5 During your educational journey, what emotions did you feel when you were evaluated or when you received feedback? [Copiați](#)

33 de răspunsuri



Figure 2. Gathering students' feedback on assessment; multiple "colourful" answers have been received after applying creative assessment methods in FSP and ESP classes.

These answers were the starting point of our research. They led to the following research question – what can an educator do to diminish the unease and increase the degree of acquired knowledge, during the summative and formative assessment stage?

The research methodology included a 5-question questionnaire addressed to thirty-three university students in order to have a clear understanding of their perception of the assessment process. Based on the answers received, we developed specific measurement instruments. These instruments include all linguistic, paralinguistic, and metalinguistic aspects to be considered when testing skills for oral presentation in a business environment. Also, based on the received responses, we have highlighted the importance of constant evaluation and feedback provided progressively and continuously. These are to be carried out in an environment that primarily ensures the development of presentation skills.

This research has three main parts, ending with a central topic. More specifically, we discuss the evaluation of learning from a communicative approach. Secondly, we stress the importance of the congruence between the three pedagogical stages of teaching-learning-evaluating, and exemplifying, thirdly, with concrete illustrations from our experience as teacher-researchers in the field of FOS (French for Specific Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes), concerning oral presentations in the business and working environment. Finally, we focus on the importance of the teacher creating a teaching-learning-evaluating environment whose characteristics are confidence, simplicity, and security, to reduce the “blue color” found in the answers to the questionnaire mentioned above.

1. Assessing learning from a Communicative Approach

A communicative approach refers to the teacher's primary objective in teaching as a means of communication in a professional setting. Two main directions are highlighted in the literature: (1) a minimalist, survival-oriented approach, known as the threshold level in the Common European Framework of Reference, and, (2) a second, maximalist one, in which none of the linguistic and paralinguistic component horizons can be neglected.

Based on the premise that to assess students' progress, the teacher needs to plan a meaningful teaching and assessment approach. Students need to know from the outset the intentions of the learning activities,

namely, the learning objectives, the level of performance, and the criteria by which the quality of their learning will be judged. When we talk about assessment, the four directions we address are intention, measurement, interpretation and judgement of results. This is to arrive at the characteristics of an objective judgment and the final decision, i.e., the grade. As a teacher, one should ask oneself, "when and why to assess?", with the primary objective of improving language performance, and, subsequently, improving work-related communication. Behavior is easy to change, unlike personality; it is believed that we can change what we do and not what we are. Therefore, it is recommended to aim to "change one's behavior, not one's personality" (Bhattarai, 2007: 152).

Evaluation is carried out with an intention related to either a formative or a summative function. On the one hand, summative evaluation classifies, certifies, and assesses students' progress, and mastery in relation to program objectives. Summative evaluation is comprehensive and normative, reflecting a synthesis of learning. It is an assessment of what has been learned. On the other hand, formative evaluation helps students from a didactic point of view, by informing them of possible shortcomings in their activities. It ensures progress. Formative assessment regulates learning activities through corrective or reinforcing educational activities.

In her research, *Évaluer des apprentissages dans une approche communicative (Assessing Learning in a Communicative Approach)*, Denise Lussier suggests an allegorical graph of Mount Everest to describe the stages of the educational process. This graph represents the ascent of the mountain and comprises six stages, each representing one of the six base camps - or relays - necessary to reach the top of the mountain. For each stage to be overcome, mastery or non-mastery must be determined. That means that climbers should ask themselves questions about the journey, such as: (i) The air is getting thinner than expected. Do we have enough oxygen?; or (ii) An expedition member is injured. Should we continue or give up? (Lussier, 1992:20).

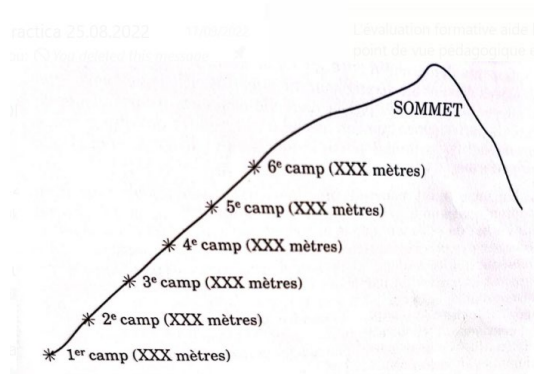


Figure 3. Lussier, D., 1992:19

Transposed into pedagogical terms related to our topic, these interrogations could be translated into the following questions:

- i. Linguistic and discourse structures are increasing in number and difficulty. Do we have enough remedial and reinforcing activities to ensure students' progress?
- ii. If a student does not master certain grammatical aspects well, should we continue?

Each camp, each relay, and each intermediate stage represent a formative assessment. This is necessary to reinforce students' skills so that they can reach the top "of the mountain", it is needed to strengthen their skills to pass the final, summative evaluation of a study cycle. The assessment intention dictates the choice of the measurement instrument, the assessment criteria, and the threshold level. During the learning sequences, a teacher makes corrections to reinforce knowledge and adjust the teaching process. The following learning sequence will start only after the previous one has been completed and properly assessed.

Evaluation and measurement include data collection, data organization, interpretation of results, judgment, and decision.

When the teacher wants to collect observations during the learning process or when he/she wants to measure certain qualities of an oral performance, he/she uses an evaluation grid, referring to oral performance criteria, such as linguistic performance, i.e., lexical, morphosyntactic and phonological elements; discourse performance, which implies coherence, and cohesion of the message; sociolinguistic performance, referring to discourse relatedness to the communication situation. In a communicative

approach, these criteria explain the expected performance. In other words, the message must be intelligible, and the information accurate. Furthermore, all aspects of the linguistic performance (lexical, morphosyntactic, phonological elements, grammaticality notions, prosody) must be taken into account, as well as the discourse (coherence and cohesion of the message) and the sociolinguistic performance (adaptation of the discourse to the situation and context of communication). Each linguistic skill is evaluated and corrected separately and aims at the expected performance criteria and degree of success set at the beginning.

Measuring means considering all possible meanings from the collected and organized data in interpreting assessment results. The teacher can interpret them normatively. In a normative interpretation, each student is placed in relation to the average of his/her group. Using the Gaussian Bell³, we get a standard average where students are ranked from highest to lowest.

Another type of interpretation, criteria interpretation, is made in relation to the intended objectives of the learning sequence. As part of student evaluation, the teacher examines whether or not the students' performance differs from the learning objectives. In this case, the assessment is student-centered.

In terms of judgment and decision-making, to grade the student, one must consider the objectivity of the assessment. Evaluation should not be a mere prescribed activity, but rather focused and based on well-established performance criteria. Students must be aware of these criteria and of the minimum level of performance from the beginning of the course. During both objective and subjective examinations judgment must be made consciously and mathematically. Cuoş (2008:32) revisits the paradigms of docimology and distinguishes between (1) comparative evaluation, which implies comparing and classifying students, according to their level of success; (2) evaluation by objectives or evaluation based on criteria which provides functional information about students, relating them to objectives and standards, and offering improvement solutions; (3) corrective assessment, that provides the student with additional information, to facilitate the learning process; and (4) conscious or formative assessment, which integrates assessment into the learning

³ The Gaussian curve graphically represents the distribution of a series of data.

process. During this type of assessment, the students take control of their training process.

2. The congruency between teaching-learning-assessment: oral presentations

There should be a strong connection between teaching and learning processes and assessment. We illustrate this for the specific case of business oral presentations. It is imperative to know, from the very beginning, that what is assessed has to be exactly what one has taught. The main goal of assessment is to enhance subsequent performance. However, a lack of adequate assessment or its complete absence, for example, can result in inaccurate performance perceptions. According to the literature, offering and receiving feedback have a direct impact on future graduates' employability prospects.

Educational assessment is not an end in itself. Moreover, as we saw in the first part of this research, it is based on a specific and rigorous approach. This includes remembering intention, assessing judgment, and making a decision. This practice is an integral part of the teaching-learning process.

Assessment success depends upon a strong and genuine need to justify, organize, and analyze an educational action step. Assessment is often left to intuition or common sense. Therefore, the following questions arise as to when and how to assess. Based on teaching objectives, an educator outlines both teaching and assessment activities. For instance, the following table presents an overview of the influence of the communicative approach on defining foreign or second language teaching objectives.

The coherence between *teaching - learning - evaluation* Learning Objectives.

Table 1

Theoretical pattern	applied to foreign or second language learning – <i>i.e.</i> , ESP / FOS in a business environment
Overall objective	develop communication and presentation skills <i>i.e.</i> , learning the language as a means of communication in business and working environments
General objectives	develop language skills: - oral and written comprehension and production - oral presentations in business contexts, <i>i.e.</i> , in sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts that are meaningful to the learner

Theoretical pattern	applied to foreign or second language learning <i>– i.e., ESP / FOS in a business environment</i>
Final (specific) objectives	to have learners use language skills in a variety of communicative situations: - types of discourse - appropriate language functions
Intermediary objectives	offer students the knowledge and concepts to develop the targeted skills, in terms of: - lexical and grammatical elements - cultural elements - registers and varieties of language - types of discourse: informative, inciting, narrative, argumentative, ludic, and expressive speeches - genres of texts

Setting up learning objectives for each educational sequence is extremely significant. As one may observe in the above chart, to teach and evaluate how to deliver a business presentation, the overall objective is, of course, to develop students' communication and presentation skills. This implies learning the language as a means of communication for business and working environments. The general objectives would be to develop language skills, such as oral and written comprehension, and written production in order to present in realistic social-linguistic and social-cultural contexts which are meaningful to learners. The final (specific) objectives include assessing the ability of students to cope and communicate appropriately in different linguistic contexts and situations. Finally, intermediate objectives aim to familiarize students with all of the necessary linguistic tools, including lexical, grammatical, cultural, and so forth.

3. Teaching and assessing English / French for business (FOS / ESP)

Bové and Thill rightly state in their book *Business Communication* that oral presentations in a business environment offer the speaker the opportunity to apply all the communication skills that one has acquired, from analyzing the audience's profile to choosing the use of presentation materials for public speaking:

“Oral business presentations offer the speaker the opportunity to apply all the communication skills he or she has acquired, from analyzing the audience’s profile, to choosing the use of presentation materials, and to practicing public speaking.”

(Bovée and Thill, 2016:431)

During the teaching-assimilation process, the language – oral and written – skills to be assessed should be measured in real-life communication situations, thereby encouraging interaction. Similarly, they should be noted according to different difficulty levels, and based on various evaluation techniques using different types of stimuli. All language skills – reading, writing, speaking - should be assessed and students are to be asked to use all these skills according to specific taxonomic levels, such as to identify, reuse, analyze, and deduce, from a selection of the different types of activities, such as gap texts, role-playing or problem-solving. The stimuli an educator could choose from can be spoken, including messages, visuals, cartoons, graphics, and/or written texts that need to be read or produced.

As shown in Table 2 below, the link between teaching, learning, and assessing business presentations also implies improving all possible skills in linguistics, social linguistics, and sociocultural skills. In such an approach, educational objectives are no longer defined simply in terms of synthetic structures and lists of lexical items. The objectives focus on skill development. In other words, students' abilities and performance are more important than their actual knowledge. After an assessment, providing feedback implies as an objective to change or to improve a certain type of behavior in terms of language use, to obtain the desired result in terms of language performance and to determine the next educational steps.

Assessment offshoots of language skills

Table 2

To be assessed	language skills
Skills	oral and written skills that define a specific level of performance
in a real-life communication situation that encourages interaction	in terms of assessment tasks integrating language skills (reading, writing and speaking)
according to different difficulty levels	referring to behaviors of different taxonomic levels (identify, reuse, analyze, deduce)

To be assessed	language skills
based on various evaluation techniques	from a selection of different types of items: - gap texts, - role-playing, - problem solving.
using various types of stimuli	- oral (messages), - visual (cartoons), - written (texts to be read or produced).

Evaluating an oral presentation, therefore, means assessing all four language skills of oral and written comprehension and production and, in addition, paralinguistic criteria, such as the objectives of the presentation, the clarity, the coherence of content, the rigor of the presented ideas and of the analysis, good use of statistics and examples, effective use of images, tone, pitch, volume, and clarity of the voice.

Asses only what is taught

Table 3

SKILLS	PARAMETERS	PERFORMANCE CRITERIA
Linguistics	Phonology Lexis Syntax	- pronunciation - intonation and speech flow - vocabulary and possible interferences with L1 - order and arrangement of words in sentences - grammatical categories -verb tenses
Sociolinguistics and sociocultural	Functions of communication Context of communication	- the relevance of the information to the purpose of the communication - accuracy of the message - the intelligibility of the message - matching the speech to the intended purpose, interlocutors and situation
Discursive	Speech elements - cohesion - coherence	- student's adaptability to various types of discourse - appropriate use of hinges (prepositions, conjunctions, linking words...) - organization of ideas, logical sequence of ideas -reconstruction of texts or messages

SKILLS	PARAMETERS	PERFORMANCE CRITERIA
Strategic	Verbal and non-verbal reactions	- use of gestures, mimics, periphrases for compensatory purposes - asking questions to understand a message
Academic	Scientific research	Gather information and data, decode and recode information, interpret it from one's own academic perspective.

To efficiently and contextually integrate assessment in a business environment, it is critical to emphasize two aspects: (1) that insufficient feedback or lack of it may prevent future actions from being rectified. Garber (2004:32) says that if feedback is received too late it may be impossible to rectify anything. (2) Secondly, it is imperative to aim at changing one's behavior and not one's personality. Therefore, by aiming at changing a type of behavior we will obtain a new, more desirable result, and see what the next steps to be taken are.

During our assessment sessions of oral business presentations, we focused on three different evaluation techniques:

(1) Self-evaluation.

This method encourages students to evaluate their own presentation immediately after defending it. They are very perceptive. They instantly realize what could have been improved. Some of the questions we ask them right after the presentation are: How do you think it turned out?; What could you have done differently to improve your presentation?; What did you do that you are particularly proud of?; What did you learn from preparing this pre-presentation?; What would you change next time?

(2) Colleague evaluation.

Peer assessment has proven to be one of the most effective ways to provide follow-up feedback. Encouraging students to evaluate others' presentations forces them to observe the presentation from the point of view of continuity and execution. It allows them to differentiate between an outstanding presentation and an ordinary one. The more they watch and listen, the more they learn. We also have class discussions immediately after presentations. During these discussions, we ask the students to address questions to their colleagues, related to the presented topic, to make sure they listen.

(3) A specific measuring instrument.

Another method of peer evaluation is to give students a form to complete. It requires more time to prepare, but using clear evaluation

criteria is more professional. Two advantages arise if students are given an evaluation grid to fill in for their colleagues, so that they can check the significant points that will be marked: they are given autonomy in scoring, which makes them more responsible listeners and, being assessors themselves, they understand better the criteria they will have to meet in turn. Google Forms may also be used. Examples of aspects to be assessed include: quality and design of the slides, effective background, coherence of presentation, the clear transmission of the message, good organization of the content, the student's personal presentation style, eye contact, avoiding reading and engaging with the audience. In addition, it is worthwhile to ask colleagues for their further comments and suggestions.

Finally, the teacher's professional assessment grid needs to be developed, refined, and detailed. Based on the performance criteria covered in the learning phase, the assessment parameters include aspects such as clarity of the message delivery; structure of the presentation, presence of research, figures, interviews that arouse the audience's interest, and visible literature sources at the end of the presentation. In terms of structure, the student must arouse interest, define the subject, present the plan, and state the problem. In the development of the presentation, a student has to clear out the main parts and make transitions between parts. In the conclusion the author must recall the points and open up, broaden the subject towards further research. Regarding language use, the student should use simple, grammatically correct, and complete sentences, with vocabulary relevant to the topic. Finally, in terms of student behavior and general attitude, the speech needs to be clear. Attention should also be paid to the pace, delivery, intonation, and articulation of the speech while showing confidence, conviction, and dynamism. Another important aspect is that a student has to prepare enough and thoroughly, so as to be able to master the content of the presentation and to gain independence from notes.

4. Conclusions. A teaching - learning - assessment environment of trust and safety.

The main guideline of our research is that promoting a confident and safe teaching - learning - assessment environment is a key precondition for long-lasting language acquisition. As seen in the questionnaire addressed to our students, once the assessment becomes more tranquil,

stress-free, and creative, students become more involved and engaged in the learning process. Nevertheless, as shown, the assessment process should be very firm and strict in terms of content and grading. On the one hand, in terms of content, the only knowledge to be assessed is specifically and solely the one taught and practiced beforehand. On the other hand, in terms of grading, assessment should never be left to chance or intuition. Clear measurement tools should be used, and presented to students thoroughly from the beginning of the teaching activity. Moreover, from the standpoint of assessing oral presentations in a business environment, students must be exposed to and practice all linguistic, paralinguistic, academic, posture, verbal, and bodily expression skills. Therefore, in conclusion, it should be pointed out once again that it is extremely important to find analytical and well-designed in/formative assessment methods for oral presentation skills, as oral presentations are highly topical both in the educational environment and in the labor market.

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