CHALLENGING ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS

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Abstract

Academic presentations are hard to teach and students frequently have difficulties in their preparation and delivery. This article aims to present some of the findings of researchers in this area related to communication apprehension encountered both by native and non-native speakers of English. It also discusses the notion of high- and low-context cultures as well as various types of organization of presentations and overviews presentations as a process rather than a product developed with New Bulgarian University (NBU) students of EFL courses at level B1-B2 according to CEFR.

Keywords: academic presentations, university students, communication apprehension, EFL, culture

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Giving academic presentations is beyond any doubt one of the challenges most university students and teachers have to cope with. However, when these presentations are delivered in a foreign language, the challenge is even greater. If according to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2011) the level of fluency of the students trained to speak before an audience is B1-B2, the challenge might seem just too great to cope with. If we consider the main principles of successful speakers to be confidence, purpose and preparation, then we can better comprehend the importance of communication apprehension. Moreover, we should also bear in mind that there are culturally-specific influences on the way presentations are structured and that it is important to view a presentation as a process rather than a product, because it is in the process of preparation itself that students become successful presenters in a foreign language.

The basic principles of successful presentations

A number of researchers have formulated the basic principles of speaking before an audience (Lucas, 2004; O'Hair, Stewart & Rubinstein, 2007; Osborne & Osborne, 1997; Verderber, 1994). The most important characteristics of successful speakers are confidence, purpose and preparation.

One of the most important principles for a speaker is to display a strong sense of confidence and purpose. The generally accepted view is that that the more informed people are about the subject of their presentation, the more confident they are when they deliver their presentations.

Furthermore, confidence adds to the sense of purpose, i.e. the more evidence speakers can summon, the more convincing they are. In other words, in order to defend a position the effective speaker should be as convincing and as confident as possible. To achieve this, the speaker should be aware that presentations are inherently interactive. When speakers face their audiences, they are expected to give as many arguments as necessary to support their position and to convince their audience. Although each presentation or speech is usually viewed as a monologue, it is in fact dialogical in its nature. As a result, speakers should be able to anticipate what questions might be asked in a plausible dialogue on a certain topic. Thus all the messages in a presentation are

expected to be well-organized rhetorically, which is the third principle used by speakers who want to be effective communicators.

Finally, the above-mentioned authors claim that audiences respond best to well-prepared, extemporaneous presentations. However, it should be highlighted that being extemporaneous does not necessarily presuppose lack of preparation. Neither does it imply that speakers should spend no time at all in preparation. On the contrary, the best extemporaneous presentations need extensive experience and practice in the field of expertise.

To sum up, confidence, purpose and preparation are the indispensable prerequisites of a successful presentation and should be effectively employed in speeches both in the native and foreign language. However, in order to attain this level of confidence, purpose and preparation, a student should first be assisted by the teacher to cope with communication apprehension. The student should also be aware of the differences between rhetorical organizations of presentations in high and low-context cultures and should view an academic presentation as a process rather than a product.

Communication apprehension

It is a most natural human reaction, to be nervous, scared or distressed when speaking in front of a group of people even in one's native language. It may be translated as shyness, reticence or a lack of skills and knowledge associated with the topic of the speech. However, it is worth examining whether anxiety about giving a presentation is typical of most English speaking people and whether non-native English speakers view it in a similar way.

Speaking in front of a group of people has been viewed as one of the most common fears among Americans. Many authors define it as one of the major fears which the majority of people suffer from. For instance, Lilyan Wilder states (Wilder, 1999, p. 1) that "Fear of public speaking consistently tops every list of human fears. In an oft-cited 1993 study done by the polling firm Bruskin-Goldring, 45% of those surveyed said they feared public speaking. In comparison, only 30% said they feared death. In a study of 3,000 Americans published in the *Book of Lists* (Wallechinsky & Wallace, 1995) the number one fear cited by 41% of those studied was speaking to an audience. A similar

study by Seifert of the Behavioral Institute of Atlanta indicated that "40 million Americans hate speaking so much, they'd do almost anything to avoid it, and perhaps as many as 40 million who speak all the time feel anxious and do not want to give a talk!" Morreale (2010, p.53) also used the results of the Bruskin-Goldring Research Report (Feb.1993) and ranked "Speaking before a group" as the top fear of 45% of Americans, 54% of women and 34% of men respectively.

Apprehension associated with speaking to a group has been studied by American researchers since the 1930s. In 1970s McCroskey introduced the term and notion of "communication apprehension" standing for "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (Morreale, 2010, p.78). He suggested that communication apprehension may be encountered in interpersonal communication, in communication in meetings, in group communication and in public speaking, which overlaps with the area of giving presentations before an audience.

Interpersonal communication is defined as a "trait-like communication apprehension" or an "invariant characteristic of an individual", and it is viewed as "a relatively enduring, personality-type orientation toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts" (McCroskey, 1977, p.147). The researcher noted three varieties of communication apprehension accompanying interpersonal communication, namely apprehension about oral communication, about writing, and about singing.

The apprehension encountered when communicating in meetings has been labelled as "situational communication apprehension" or "the reactions of an individual to communicating with a given individual or a group of individuals at a given time" (McCroskey, 1977, p.149). In other words, it is "a transitory orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1977, p.149), while "a relatively enduring orientation toward communication with a given person or group of people" (McCroskey, 1977, p.148) is thought to define communication apprehension, typical of group communication, known as a "person – group communication apprehension", which is ascribed to "the reactions of an individual to communicating with a given individual or a group of individuals across time" (ibid.).

The so-called "generalized context communication apprehension" type of apprehension concerns the fear of public speaking. It has been defined as "a relatively enduring, personality-type orientation in a given type of context" (McCroskey, 1977, p.147). As a type of apprehension discussed primarily in this article, its causes, either hereditary or due to some influences of the environment, are of particular importance. No pathological cases will be examined here; nevertheless some of the causes triggered by environment will be referred to. McCroskey (1977, p.155-156) discusses some of the reasons associated with learned behaviour, namely certain elements in a situation which are usually considered cause increased apprehension, such as novelty, formality, subordinate status, conspicuousness, unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, and degree of attention of others. Novelty is associated with situations which people rarely encounter. Being asked to deliver a presentation is not an experience a person is involved in every day. Consequently, it is stressful and most people are uncertain about their performance. Moreover, presentations are associated with formal occasions and there are conventions to be followed. When a person is uncertain about the rules, it is natural for the level of apprehension to rise. Another context-induced factor of stress is the subordinate status of the speaker in a type of academic presentation experience. If a teacher sets the task of preparing a presentation, students feel more than tense about their performance, which adds to the level of apprehension. Furthermore, the fear of being conspicuous is a factor which makes a presentation a particularly stressful experience. It is very hard for a person to feel relaxed, when an audience is focused on him/her. Students are additionally stressed by fears related to grades and performance. Last but not least, the factors of unfamiliarity with the audience, dissimilarity to it and the degree of attention paid by it to the speaker also relate to the audience itself. Some people are particularly apprehensive when they speak before an unfamiliar audience. However, there are cases when speakers prefer to talk to unfamiliar listeners because of certain personal factors. This also applies to the type of audience: some speakers prefer their audience to be comprised of their peers whom they usually consider friendlier and more good-willed. On the other hand, others might appreciate an audience consisting of people completely different from them as personalities. Another very personal factor influencing presenters is the degree of attention each speaker feels comfortable with which is dependent on each and every situation. However, it is claimed that a moderate degree of attention is usually least stressful, since too much or too little attention may

add to the level of apprehension. To sum up, when discussing academic presentations, the most important factors which cause stress and apprehension are features such as novelty, formality, subordinate status and conspicuousness. Conversely unfamiliarity, dissimilarity and degree of attention of others vary from person to person and may be even disregarded since the audience is usually comprised of familiar, friendly and good-willed peers who act as prompters rather than deterrents while students are delivering academic presentations.

There are also studies addressing communication apprehension experienced by non-native English speakers. Yung and McCroskey (2004) published the results of their study of bilinguals in the United States, showing that the level of apprehension registered in the non-native English speaking students in public speaking situations is high and even higher when they have to communicate in English. The instrument used by the researchers to measure communication apprehension was Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (Yung & McCroskey, 2004). It comprises twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with others. Each respondent is supposed to indicate the degree to which each statement applies to him/her by marking 1 (Strongly Disagree); 2 (Disagree); 3 (Neutral); 4 (Agree); 5 (Strongly Agree). The statements are listed is the Appendix.

The scores can range from 24 to 120. Those below 51 are typical of people who have very low communication apprehension, scores from 51 to 80 show average communication apprehension, while scores above 80 show high levels of communication apprehension. The norms set for PRCA-24 are based on over 40,000 college students, while data from over 3,000 non-student adults in a US sample provided similar figures. The mean total score quoted by McCroskey (1982) was 65.6 distributed into the following subscores:

- group discussion apprehension: 15.4;
- apprehension at meetings: 16.4;
- interpersonal communication apprehension: 14.2;
- public speaking apprehension: 19.3

This research tool was used with twenty NBU students enrolled in EFL courses at B1-B2 level according to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2011). They were asked to complete the PRCA-24, grading from 1 to 5 the statements included in it.

The NBU students asked to fill in the questionnaire achieved a mean total score of 82.8 and the following subscores:

- group discussion apprehension: 20.7;

- apprehension at meetings: 21.5;

- interpersonal communication apprehension: 20.2;

- public speaking apprehension: 20.4

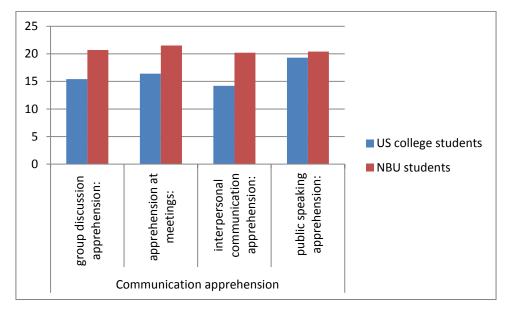The following graphic represents the two sets of scores::

Fig. 1 Communication apprehension measured in US college students and NBU students

The envisaged standard deviation of the total score is 15.3, while the deviations of the subscores are 4.8 (group discussion apprehension); 4.2 (apprehension at meetings); 3.9 (interpersonal communication apprehension); 5.1 (public speaking apprehension) respectively. Thus the scores of the NBU students are within the reasonable limits. Naturally, the scores are higher due to the fact that the NBU students use English as a foreign language, they are not immersed in an English-speaking environment as the US college students and have not been trained to participate in group discussions, meetings, conversations or give speeches or presentations as part of their secondary education. Moreover, if there is much anxiety related to speaking in

front of a group of people including representatives of a nation with such a long tradition in developing this skill, non-native speakers of English are unsurprisingly even more distressed when giving a presentation in a foreign language.

To sum up, it is necessary to overcome this fear, even though it is rated as one of the most significant. It should be remembered that giving a presentation involves with the sharing information and information has been conveyed orally since the dawn of times. As a result, it is vital to be able to present pertinent information in the most effective culturally-specific way. To be able to fight it, students should be aware that it is a common and widespread fear even among native speakers of English and that there are culturally-specific rhetorical organizations within the so called high and low-context cultures.

Culturally-specific rhetorical organizations

Pointing at the organizational structure, it is worth mentioning that sometimes the expectations of teachers as representatives of the target language culture and EFL students as representatives of their native non-English cultures clash. If a certain organizational structure is expected by the teacher but the students' idea of an effective structure differs completely, then there might be some culturally-specific reasons that explain the dissimilarity. Furthermore, even if students and teachers have one and the same organizational pattern in their minds, the supporting material presented by the student may not be enough. In this case it might be a matter of "high context" and "low context" cultures (Connor, 2004).

High-context cultures (incl. Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America) are defined as collectivist and intuitive, in which people are said to emphasise interpersonal relationships. According to Hall (1976), these cultures prefer group harmony to individual achievement and are governed mostly by intuition and feelings which makes context, gestures and even the atmosphere of a situation more important than words. Communication in such cultures is usually indirect and formal, typically consisting of flowery language and elaborate apologies.

In contrast, low-context cultures (incl. North America and Western Europe) are suggested to be logical, linear and individualistic. Logic and directness are mostly

valued by their representatives and most decisions are based on fact rather than intuition. Communication is usually straightforward, concise and action-packed, making use of precise words, intended to be taken literally.

The development of rhetorical organization is linked to education and culture. It starts in early childhood when children are taught in a culturally-specific way how to understand and organize ideas. Kaplan (1966) explores why the rhetoric of essays written by non-native English speaking students varies considerably from the rhetoric of native speakers' essays by analysing the organization of paragraphs in ESL student essays. He identifies five types of paragraph development for five nationalities and visually represents different rhetorical organization patterns – the "English" line of organization is straight or the rhetorical organization pattern is direct, at least it is thought to be so by the speakers of English, while all the rest are less direct. In his research Kaplan shows that the native rhetorical structures persist in the essays written by non-native English speakers.
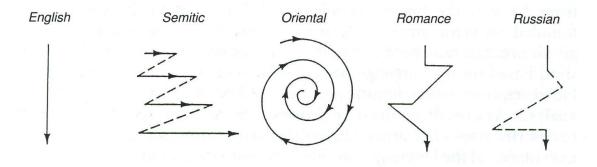

Fig. 2 Kaplan's (1966) diagram presenting cross-cultural differences in paragraph organization in the study on cultural thought patterns in intercultural education

The diagram illustrates the fact that people with different mother tongues and cultural backgrounds communicate in a different way. Connor (1996, 2004) states that individuals write differently based on their native language and the differences are evident in sentence organization, selection of main points and the entire structure of essays.

Although these authors are predominantly concerned with explaining patterns in writing, including EFL writing, their findings may be applied to speech, especially when

presentations are concerned, since they are the junction where reading, writing and speaking skills cross over. Academic presentations as one of the types of presentations are characterised by a strict organizational pattern, resembling the essay structure; however, they should be listener-friendly and dialogical.

In all probability Bulgarian culture may be described as a high-context culture, with a pattern of thought similar to the Russian organization as presented in Kaplan's study (1966) on cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. Therefore, it may be suggested that the most part of communication in Bulgarian is organized and communicated indirectly and formally. Following the model of low-context cultures, especially as far as the English language and tradition are concerned, writing and probably speaking are already characterised by summaries and transitions, which are typical for these cultures. However, in most cases the presence of transitions, linking phrases and summaries may be viewed by many representatives of high-context cultures as unnecessary. It is difficult for a person accustomed to one type of context to enter another one without any preparation. Students who come from high-context cultures have to adapt to the requirements a low-context culture imposes on them. Writers or speakers belonging to a high-context culture include in their writings or presentations information they presume to be relevant and necessary. However, if they are supposed to communicate in a low-context culture, their audience may find that information hard to understand.

To sum up, it might be helpful to students who deliver academic presentations, especially if their level of fluency in English is B1-B2 of CEFR (Council of Europe, 2011), to familiarise themselves with the different types of organization usually encountered in the English-speaking cultures, in order to be successful speakers.

Types of organizational order typical of English

Many authors propose different types of organization of presentations: Lucas (2004), O'Hair, Stewart & Rubenstein (2007), Verderber (1994), Sprague & Stuart (1996), in which the order of the main points depends on the topic, the purpose of the speaker and the audience. Thus students can choose the most adequate rhetorical organization that fits their purpose and suits their audience. They may opt for a

chronological order, spatial order, causal order, problem-solution order and topical order.

The chronological order is suitable for presentations in which the pattern of the main points is based on time. Presentations on topics dealing with a process, a story, a performance, a historical event or a biography naturally apply this pattern. It is easy for the audience to anticipate the order of the ideas and easily follow the speaker. Moreover, presenting steps in a chronological order is a strategy made frequently use of in the English-speaking cultures, as it is evident in the Disney Channel interactive animated series *Special Agent Oso* which introduce English-speaking children to a culturally-specific way of reasoning and sequencing. An emblematic song is typical of each episode and, setting a specific task, it follows a chronological order. In episode 1 the song goes as follows:

> *Three special steps: that's all you need.*
> *Three special steps and you'll succeed!*
> *Your special assignment is starting now*
> *And three special steps will show you how*
> *Step one: Find wrapping paper*
> *Step two: Fold and tape it around the present*
> *Step three: Put a bow on the wrapped gift*
> *Three special steps, so now you know.*
> *Three special steps and you're ready to go.*
> *The checklist has all the steps you need.*
> *Just follow them and you will succeed*
> *With three special steps.*

Apart from the chronological order, the song teaches the English-speaking audience to use the number three, so familiar and widely used in these cultures, since thinking of three reasons (or being told the three special steps to finish an assignment in the series) means that a person is convincing enough (or the main character is successful every time).

The second type of order, spatial order, is as straightforward as the chronological order, easy to follow and typical of explanatory presentations. In this case the direction

determines the order of the ideas. For example, a presentation dealing with the sites of heritage in Bulgaria may be organized from East to West or from North to South.

The third type of organizational order is the causal order which is typical of informative and persuasive presentations due to its main characteristic, i.e. to establish a cause-and-effect relationship. A presentation on smoking being bad for the health clearly establishes a causal relationship.

The fourth type, problem-solution order, sets a problem and offers a solution. In the 1930s Alan Monroe, Purdue University, USA, developed a technique to be used in speeches to inspire people to take action when trying to solve a problem. His "motivated sequence" is still used today (Council of Europe, 2011). It consists of five elements, namely attention, need, satisfaction, visualisation and action. The speaker is advised first to grab the attention of the audience using a shocking example, a dramatic occasion or a quotation. By using the next element, need, the speaker personalises the problem, convincing the audience that it is vital to solve it. The element "satisfaction" provides a solution, while "visualisation" presents the consequences suffered unless action is taken. In the "action" element the speaker tells the audience what they are supposed to do personally to help solve the problem.

Last but not least, the type of organizational order, typical of the English-speaking culture, is topical order. It offers no specific pattern among the main points of the speech. In this way the speaker is required to explain the pattern to the audience.

To sum up, when students are aware of the fact that they are expected to follow a certain organizational order, their task becomes easier to cope with. Familiarisation with the various organizational orders is a responsibility of the teacher who should also explain and show that preparing a presentation is a process in which s/he becomes a facilitator, assisting and advising students throughout all its stages.

The process of preparing a presentation

Seeing a presentation as a process is based on the concept of process writing. The important part is that the focus is on the various stages of the process (planning stage, composition stage, and presentation stage) and not on the final product. Tobin

(2001), a proponent of writing as a process, states that "traditional teaching produces canned, dull, lifeless work" as opposed to "lively, engaging, dynamic, and strongly voiced" work. Teaching how to prepare presentations as a process evaluation takes place at each of its stages. Thus corrective actions are taken early enough to prevent possible misunderstandings later on. It is important to state clearly the presentation requirements at the very beginning, so that students are certain that they are heading in the right direction.

At the planning stage the role of the teacher is to help students set their goals, choose their main points and organize them in the most effective way. It is of utmost importance to choose a subject, which is defined as the first step when preparing a presentation by authors such as O'Hair, Stewart & Rubenstein (2007), Osborne and Osborne (1997), Verderber (1994), Sprague & Stuart (1996), Cochrane, Fox, & Thedwall (2004). There are various methods suggested to students to select their topics (Lucas, 2004). Some students may prefer topics they know a lot about because they may feel more comfortable speaking. Previous knowledge is viewed as very important by some students and may even lessen their communication apprehension. On the other hand, there are students who opt for topics they want to know more about. There are many cases when students are interested in certain topics and they do some research to learn about them. Another method of selecting a topic involves brainstorming and using various resources. In this case the goal is to find a topic students are familiar with or would like to know more about. Sprague & Stuart (1996) add more steps to narrowing the topic, e.g. determining the number of ideas one can cover in the allotted time, selecting main ideas based upon the audience, the occasion and the personal strengths of a speaker, and clarifying the purpose of the speech. At this stage early feedback monitors topic selection, organization pattern, and the effective use of the Power Point.

At the composition stage the teacher is expected to help students evaluate various rhetorical orders. One of the ways to do it is to have them prepare multiple methods of organizing a topic, i.e. to have them prepare the main points of a topic by following a different rhetorical order each time. In this way students may think of different options and later on decide on the best organization of their topic.

The presentation stage deals with the outcome of the mutual efforts of the teacher and the student. The issue of communication apprehension, together with the important issues of eye contact, body language and answering questions asked by the audience should be discussed with students, in order to raise their awareness of the different strategies to cope with stress and nervousness typical for most speakers.

To sum up, the planning, composition and presentation stages should be developed by the students themselves in collaboration with their teachers in their role of mediators between the native and target culture expectations and conventions.

Academic presentations at level B1-B2 according to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2011) prepared by NBU students

After familiarisation the different types of organization of presentations, the students enrolled in EFL courses at NBU are asked to prepare a presentation on a topic of their own choice. The planning stage is especially important and the role of the teacher there is crucial. It is at that point when students are advised to think about the areas they are experts in or to brainstorm and collect information from different sources prior to starting to think about their main points.

Another important aspect is to help them narrow down the topic and determine three ideas that can be covered in a three-four-minute presentation. They are advised to prepare Microsoft PowerPoint™ presentations to organize their main ideas in the most effective way. The requirements of their ppt-s are as follows: no more than six slides: title; an introduction, consisting of three main points; the three main points, each one presented on a slide; conclusion. The use of ppt-s is a challenge itself since many students deliver presentations by simply reading out whole passages pasted on the slides. The following sample presentation usually sets a good example and clarifies the major aspects of successful preparation:

Title: Successful Presentations

Slide 1: MajorPrinciples
- Keep it simple and straightforward
- Use the rule of three
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse

Slide 2: Keep it simple and straightforward

- organization;
- sentences;
- design.

Slide 3: Use the rule of three

- three main ideas;
- three points in each slide;
- three examples.

Slide 4: Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse

- confident;
- purposeful;
- prepared.

Slide 5: Wrapping up

- Keep it simple and straightforward
- Use the rule of three
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse

The layout of the sample presentation sets an example on how students should organize their own presentations and shows them how a simple and straightforward structure works, namely: tell your audience what you are going to talk about; talk about it; summarize what you have talked about.

Conclusion

Academic presentations in a foreign language are a real challenge to both university students and teachers. Familiarity with the specific nature of communication apprehension, the existence of culturally-specific rhetorical organizations and viewing the presentation as a process rather than a product, usually works as the necessary prerequisite to encourage, advise and assist students while acquiring the basics of becoming successful speakers. To develop this skill, students should realize that it is of vital importance for both their academic and professional development in the 21st century. Their knowledge and understanding of these aspects of oral communication can help them alleviate the fear and distress which both native and non-native English speaking students experience at the mere thought of preparing and giving academic presentations.

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Appendix

1. I dislike participating in group discussions.

2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.

3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.

4. I like to get involved in group discussions.

5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.

6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.

7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.

8. Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.

9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.

10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.

11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.

12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.

13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.

14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.

15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.

16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.

17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.

18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.

19. I have no fear of giving a speech.

20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.

21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.

22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.

23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.

24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.