



DEVELOPING ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

Talabalar: Isoqova Sabrina, Xo'jamqulova Madina, Eshqobilova Nozanin,
Ziyodova Marjona

Ustozlar: Rasulova Dilbar, Amanova Onorxol

ABSTRACT

Effective oral presentation skills are essential for success in academic and professional settings. They enable students and researchers to communicate ideas clearly, persuasively, and confidently. This paper explores the significance of oral presentation skills in academic contexts, examines the key components of successful presentations, and provides strategies for improvement. The study highlights the importance of language proficiency, body language, organization, and audience awareness. Moreover, it emphasizes the role of technology and practice in developing these skills. The findings suggest that systematic training and continuous feedback can significantly enhance learners' academic communication competence.

Keywords: oral presentation, academic communication, language skills, confidence, public speaking, academic performance

INTRODUCTION

Oral presentation is among the key pedagogical techniques employed by instructors in higher education. The significance of oral communication has long been acknowledged as a crucial component of academic and professional success. Developing oral communication competence is vital not only for mastering subject-specific knowledge but also for achieving effective performance in professional contexts. Across university programs, teachers frequently assign oral presentations to help students engage more deeply with course material and enhance its practical application.

The primary aim is to explore how oral presentations can function as a motivational pedagogical tool, how they contribute to the development of students' speaking abilities, and to what extent they foster active verbal participation. Oral presentations provide students with opportunities to make progress in communication and speaking skills by allowing them to express their individuality, share their thoughts, and articulate emotions and attitudes during verbal interactions. They also encourage learners to take an active role in self-directed learning.



Through oral presentations, students are able to develop personal linguistic strategies and deliver authentic knowledge in a foreign language, ensuring that their messages are effectively conveyed and understood by listeners. In this sense, oral presentations are not mere classroom simulations but real communicative acts with specific objectives. However, such tasks are only effective when learners possess a clear understanding of the skills and strategies required to perform them successfully.

Another essential feature of oral presentations is their integration of both linguistic and paralinguistic competences necessary for planning and delivering an effective speech. Students must engage in multiple stages of preparation: researching materials, processing information, taking notes, structuring an outline, drafting written or spoken content, and organizing visual or textual aids. Faced with limited language proficiency yet driven by the desire to express themselves, learners must demonstrate the ability to coordinate a wide range of complex skills.[1]

Finally, in preparing and performing an oral presentation in a foreign language, students take full responsibility for the planning process and the organization of communicative interaction among participants. This approach moves beyond simple question-and-answer exchanges to continuous, coherent, and structured speech, representing a significant advancement in their oral proficiency and communicative competence.

Among the essential competencies expected of professionals worldwide, presentation and communication skills hold a central place. In recent years, their significance has been increasingly emphasized within higher education (HE) as well. Nevertheless, it is widely acknowledged that many graduates still fail to develop these abilities to a satisfactory level. This paper arises from a recognized tension between the expectations of the accounting profession—which now places greater emphasis on the development of transferable or “soft” skills among graduates—and the persistent stereotype surrounding accountants, despite the substantial transformations the profession has undergone.

The perception of accountants as reserved or introverted professionals has continued, even though the field experienced major changes during the 1990s. The enduring stereotype of accountants as “number-crunchers lacking personality” is further reinforced by representations on digital and social media platforms. One major concern within the profession relates to how this stereotype may hinder “the development of the accounting profession” itself, as it can influence recruitment decisions and potentially become a “self-fulfilling prophecy”.

Employers have also expressed doubts about the communication readiness of graduates. Although effective communication is identified as a core competency within the accounting



industry, both academic and professional circles remain dissatisfied with the overall communication skill levels of new entrants. Consequently, as incoming university students continue to be shaped by the traditional image of accountants and often overvalue numerical competence, while employers prioritize candidates with strong interpersonal and presentation abilities, the higher education sector carries the responsibility of equipping undergraduates with the communication skills necessary to meet contemporary professional demands and enhance their employability.[2]

DISCUSSION AND SOLUTIONS

Discussions with lecturers across various disciplines reveal that oral presentations are expected to demonstrate the same degree of academic integrity and rigor as written assignments. A well-developed academic presentation must therefore be logically structured, coherent, grounded in research, and properly referenced. An evaluation of EAP presentation materials based on specific assessment criteria indicates that, while these resources effectively develop students' technical presentation abilities, they often fall short of meeting instructors' expectations for fostering academically rigorous content.

Why presentations?

Oral presentations represent a fundamental aspect of the undergraduate academic experience (Zappa-Hollman, 2007) and are considered “a key skill in academic life” (Alexander, Argent & Spencer, 2008, p.245). This is especially evident in the context of the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), a branch of the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, where students from diverse academic fields and at different stages of their undergraduate and postgraduate programs are required to give presentations as part of their coursework.

These presentation tasks vary widely in scope and format—from informal seminar discussions of assigned journal articles to brief group presentations promoting innovative ideas through poster pitches. For instance, architecture students must integrate maps, conceptual panels, and models into their presentations while defending their design decisions to an evaluative audience. Meanwhile, electrical engineering students present circuit boards they have constructed, analyze performance in relation to theoretical principles, and justify the potential commercial applications of their designs. In many programs, the presentation itself—such as a thesis defense or viva—serves as the culminating academic exercise of a student's university education.[3]



During the 2011–2012 academic year, an opportunity arose to observe students as they delivered presentations to their lecturers. Observing the Environmental Science research presentations made it apparent that academic oral presentations present distinct challenges. The first student approached the task as one might in a general presentation course—demonstrating confidence, clear articulation, and effective delivery techniques. From a language instructor's standpoint, the performance appeared competent. However, once the questioning session began, the lecturers critically examined the content and revealed that the presentation lacked academic rigor, underscoring the importance of substance over style in academic contexts.

A subsequent student, though less fluent and confident linguistically, received far more positive feedback from the lecturers. Her success stemmed from adapting the structure of a written research paper into her oral presentation. She began by reviewing existing literature and identifying a gap in knowledge, then outlined her research objectives. She proceeded to describe her methodology, presented her findings, and concluded by evaluating how effectively her project addressed the initial research question. When faced with questions, she responded thoughtfully and appropriately. Despite having weaker language proficiency, she was academically more effective because she maintained a clear purpose, logical organization, and a coherent progression of ideas throughout her presentation.

This observation supports the argument of Alexander et al. (2008, p.249), who emphasize that feedback on presentations in an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) context should prioritize higher-order skills such as clarity of purpose and evidence-based argumentation rather than focusing solely on surface-level language features. Just as a student may possess advanced writing abilities in grammar and vocabulary yet still fail to produce an academically rigorous essay, a student may have polished delivery skills but still fall short of delivering a strong academic presentation. From the perspective of subject lecturers, the true success of a presentation lies not merely in delivery techniques, but in the ability to construct a well-reasoned, logically supported, and coherent argument that reflects an understanding of the topic. One of the central aims of this paper, therefore, is to assess the extent to which current commercial EAP materials effectively foster these higher-order academic presentation skills.

Understanding Academic Oral Presentations

Despite the significance of presentations in higher education, there remains a surprising scarcity of EAP resources dedicated specifically to oral academic presentation training. Most commercially available materials continue to focus primarily on reading, writing, and listening skills. This lack of resources may stem from the fact that, compared with research articles—the most extensively studied academic genre—spoken academic genres have received relatively



little scholarly attention (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p.188). As Ferris and Tagg (1996) observed, limited research has been conducted on oral academic literacy, and this gap persists, presenting challenges for further study in this area.[4]

Miles (n.d.) also noted the limited scope of research on academic presentations, though progress is gradually being made. For instance, Seliman and Naitim (unpublished) analyzed rhetorical structures in English for Workplace presentations, while Soureshjani and Ghanbari (2012) examined factors influencing the effectiveness of academic oral presentations. Nevertheless, there remains a notable absence of comprehensive, published studies building upon Zappa-Hollman's (2007) foundational work identifying the defining characteristics of successful academic presentations.

Further Insights

To contribute to a deeper understanding of what constitutes an effective academic presentation, discussions were conducted with faculty members from the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) and a visiting professor from an American university. The participants represented diverse disciplines, including Architecture (Lecturer A), Business (Lecturers B and C), Law and Business (Lecturer D), Environmental Science (Lecturer E), Education (Lecturer F), English Studies (Lecturer G), and International Studies (Lecturer H). This multidisciplinary range provided valuable insight into how presentations are used across academic fields.

Additionally, the group reflected international diversity, with participants originating from the United States, the United Kingdom, Egypt, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Singapore, and Australia. Gender representation included five male and three female lecturers. This variety of academic and cultural perspectives contributed to a richer understanding of how oral presentation skills are valued and assessed within different educational and disciplinary contexts.[5]

We conducted one-on-one interviews with lecturers, recording the discussions on video for later analysis. The framework was intentionally flexible, allowing for spontaneous clarification and deeper exploration of ideas raised during the interviews. Each conversation lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and focused on four main questions:

1. Why are student presentations used in higher education?
2. What types of presentations do students typically perform?
3. What characteristics define a good presentation within your field?



4. What elements make a presentation academic?

Follow-up questions were asked to gain more detailed insights, and the key findings are summarized below.

Why are student presentations used in Higher Education?

Five of the eight lecturers (A, D, F, G, and H) emphasized that presenting is a critical communication skill with strong transferability to professional life. They agreed that effectively conveying information—especially data students have gathered themselves—is a central reason for incorporating presentations into academic programs. Lecturer D added that an academic presentation is “the truest measure of mastery of the subject matter,” as it demonstrates both understanding and the ability to communicate knowledge.[6]

In summary, three major purposes for academic presentations emerged:

- a) They help students develop transferable communication skills.
- b) They encourage independent learning and research-based discovery.
- c) They allow lecturers to assess how deeply and accurately students understand the material.

What kinds of presentations do students perform?

Each lecturer described the types of presentations typical in their discipline, but there were several overlaps. Both individual and group presentations are common, as are formal assessments and informal “stand up and share your views” sessions (as Lecturer B described). Lecturers A and E, representing the School of Science and Engineering, pointed out that their students consistently present research-based projects, reflecting the field’s emphasis on analytical and empirical work.

What defines a good presentation?

Although perceptions of what makes a strong presentation can vary, four key qualities were consistently identified across the interviews:

- Timing
- Structure
- Audience awareness
- Research foundation



Timing was a recurring issue mentioned by six lecturers (A, B, D, E, F, and H). Lecturer E noted that native English-speaking (NES) students in the UK tend to manage time better, fitting content appropriately into a 12-minute presentation, while many non-native English-speaking (NNES) students in China struggle to balance the amount of material within their allotted time.

Six lecturers (A, B, E, F, G, and H) emphasized the importance of a clear, logical structure. Similarly, six others (A, B, C, D, E, and H) highlighted audience engagement as a crucial factor. Lecturer B mentioned that the Q&A session allows everyone to participate, while Lecturer C considered it the most vital part of a presentation. Finally, six lecturers (A, B, C, D, E, and G) underlined the necessity for presentations to be grounded in credible, research-based content to ensure academic quality.

In essence, effective academic presentations depend on strong organization, time management, audience connection, and a well-researched foundation—all of which contribute to students' professional and academic development.[7]

The responses to this question revealed the strongest level of agreement among all interview topics. It became evident that the concepts most closely linked to what defines an *academic presentation* are referencing, citation, and verifiability. Lecturer A emphasized that every image and piece of information used in a presentation must be properly cited and referenced. Lecturer B expanded on this by insisting that all sources must be *verifiable*. Lecturer F agreed, stating that information in an academic presentation “must be verifiable; otherwise, it’s just a chat.” Similarly, Lecturer H highlighted that many MA and even PhD students still struggle with *oral citation*, expressing frustration about the lack of this essential academic skill. Lecturer G added that it is not merely referencing but the *synthesis* of sources that elevates a presentation to an academic level.

While Lecturers C and D did not specifically mention referencing or verifiability, they described their own interpretations of academic presentation standards. Lecturer D stated that such presentations should be “born of research techniques” and grounded in a strong argument. He further argued that students should not merely repeat the research, explaining that “if you cannot speak freely about the subject, you do not truly understand it.” Lecturer C also emphasized deep subject knowledge, asserting that sufficient preparation reduces nervousness because “they are living the project.” He believed that the Q&A section of a presentation is where students most effectively demonstrate understanding, as it provides an opportunity for *deeper discussion and critical engagement*.

In summary, four essential elements define an academic presentation:



1. It includes references and verifiable information.
2. It synthesizes and cites credible sources.
3. It presents coherent arguments supported by research.
4. It demonstrates genuine subject mastery and fosters further discussion.[8]

Defining the scope of the academic presentation

As outlined earlier, university students encounter many types of presentations—from formal assessments to informal seminar discussions. What unites these different forms is their *academic context*, which comes with a shared set of expectations across disciplines. Discussions with lecturers revealed that they hold presentations to the same standards as written academic work, echoing Zappa-Hollman (2007), who noted that the rigor of oral presentations mirrors that of academic essays. Although the medium differs—spoken rather than written—the essential characteristics of academic discourse remain the same: clear structure, logical flow, and research-based, verifiable conclusions.

Lecturer F succinctly described an academic presentation as “a verbal version of a written paper.” In both formats, students must construct coherent arguments supported by reliable evidence. However, oral presentations differ in that they are inherently *interactive and communicative*. They require the speaker to make complex ideas understandable and to engage the audience effectively. Additionally, presenters are often expected to demonstrate broader knowledge beyond what is included in their slides or scripts.

Unlike essays, which present a finished argument, oral presentations invite dialogue and critical questioning. Many lecturers considered the question-and-answer stage the most insightful part, as it reveals the depth of the student’s understanding and ability to think critically.

Ultimately, an academic oral presentation can be defined as:

A clear and structured verbal expression of ideas, grounded in research and supported by credible references, through which the presenter guides the audience toward logical and evidence-based conclusions. The presenter must analyze, interpret, and evaluate information while demonstrating mastery of the subject matter beyond the presented material. A successful academic presentation stimulates further discussion and allows the presenter to respond thoughtfully and confidently to audience questions.



CONCLUSION

Developing oral presentation skills is an integral part of academic success. These skills contribute not only to effective communication but also to personal growth, self-confidence, and academic achievement. With consistent practice, constructive feedback, and the integration of modern technologies, students can significantly improve their oral communication abilities. Therefore, both educators and institutions must emphasize the importance of presentation skills as a vital component of academic development.

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