

# Implementing an Ecosystem Approach to Developing Academic Oral Presentation Skills

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Oral presentation skills – in the mother tongue and in the foreign language – are among the main building blocks of communicative competence as defined in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* of 2001 [2] and 2020 [3], as well one of the key 21st century skills, which are crucial for success in higher education and the workplace [9]. We often assume that university students do not need any special instruction and/or explanation about effective presentations in academic context, believing they have had enough practice of doing oral presentation assignments before coming to the academia, and that good mastery of (foreign) language is enough in itself to guarantee success in presentation delivery. Students themselves are usually unaware of this deficiency in their communicative competence and academic skills kit until they face the disappointment of failing to present their academic work successfully. The present paper aims to share the author's experience of improving students' oral presentation skills by implementing an ecosystem approach to the educational process [6, 7] which nurtures the development of reflection-on-action learner strategies [5, 10, 11] and learner agency, i.e. "the feeling of ownership and sense of control that students have over their learning" [8], thus providing opportunities for the students not only to become more realistic and objective in their own self-assessment and regulate their own cognitive growth, but also to contribute to the learning of their colleagues in a spirit of cooperative interaction [12, 13]. Giving students access to the teachers' standards and criteria for assessing their oral presentational skills and scaffolding their conscious efforts [1, 8] to improve their communicative performance through experience [4] and constructive feedback helps students to maximize their potential and empowers them to adapt to the new requirements and flourish in the academic context.

The CEFR of 2020 [3] emphasizes on the important function that productive skills have in many academic and professional fields (e.g. the ability to make oral presentations, or produce written studies and reports), which explains the particular social value attached to them. The standards that have to be met when producing a sustained monologue or submitting a written product in this more formal context include not only linguistic quality, but also rhetoric organization of the arguments and fluency and articulateness of expression, especially when addressing an audience in real time (pp. 60–66). It is also argued that the skills in these more formal production activities are not acquired naturally, but are the result of literacy learnt through education and experience. It also involves learning the conventions of the genre concerned and the parameters defining successful performance.

Oral presentation skills are also part of the concept of 21st century skills, which educators and business leaders alike consider as important as content knowledge from core subjects and the most important driver of success both at college and in the workplace where students will have to apply in practice the theoretical knowledge they have acquired [9]. Although they are an obvious constituent of the communication skills, which is one of four major C's of the 21st-century-skills construct, the other three competences – critical thinking, creativity and collaboration – are interwoven in the ability to produce and deliver effective oral presentations.

In order to train good oral production skills, teachers need to adopt an ecological perspective to what happens in the classroom [6, 7, 8]. Learning and teaching do not take place in isolation, but within a complex and dynamic, ever-changing ecology, i.e. within a context defined by the interdependencies among all the elements of the setting, not only the physical/ material (like teaching materials and learning conditions at the educational institution), but also encompassing the actions and activities, the beliefs and attitudes of the teachers and the learners, the multilayered nature of their relationships and interaction [12, 13]. Each context contains affordances, i.e. potential learning opportunities [6, 7], and it is up to the teachers to capitalize on these affordances and create enabling conditions and offer practices for their learners to grow, i.e. to scaffold their path to success [1, 8]. The learning potential is better utilized if learner agency (the feeling of ownership and sense of control that learners have over their learning) is fostered and the effort is collective (everybody is respected and knowledge is constructed through sharing of ideas and collaboration) [8, 3].

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Agentive learners are motivated and engaged learners because they believe in their capacity to grow and know how to achieve it. They do not wait to be taught, instead they take the initiative, seizing and even creating opportunities to learn; they take risks, confident that they can learn from their mistakes; they are also resilient and persevere in order to overcome setbacks and adapt to the requirement of their learning environment [8]. Here are some of the ways in which teachers can facilitate the growth of learner agency through manipulating the pedagogical design of classroom experiences: they can discuss with learners the task goals and the standards for successful performance that they will use to assess them; they can give learners a choice in what to do and how to do it in order to achieve the learning goals; they can encourage learners to ask questions and take responsibility for filling the gaps in their knowledge; they can cultivate an attitude of inquiry/ a curious mindset and invite learners to cooperate in solving problems, thus learning from one another; they can encourage them to risk and experiment without penalizing their errors; they can help learners to self-correct and figure out for themselves the right answers (this in turn will boost their confidence in their own potential to learn); they can make use of learner-driven feedback, including peer-assessment (learners are more likely to respond positively to the constructive criticism of their colleagues than to teacher's feedback); they can encourage self-reflection at the end of the activity (so that learners become more aware of their own learning strategies, making sure success is not a strike of serendipity); teachers should start their feedback with comments on what learners managed to do successfully and try to focus on one or two major problems which they know learners will be able to overcome easily [8]. Thus empowered with a sense of purpose and agency, learners can achieve much greater success in their studies and have a far more rewarding learning experience in general, which will intrinsically motivate them to proceed learning even beyond the classroom.

Last but not least, it should be emphasized that having a learning experience and learning from experience are entirely different activities [5]: “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984: 38). In other words, in order to capitalize on the affordances of the learning context learners should be encouraged to reflect on their own learning experience – with the teacher's support and the cooperative contribution from the peers – and learn from it [4, 5, 10, 11]. In the present case study Kolb's (1984) four-stage reflective learning cycle – suggesting that effective learning occurs through a continuous cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation – was employed to structure the activities aimed at improving university students' oral presentation skills.

The ecological perspective on the learning process allowed us to see the individual learners as socially connected and part of a complex and dynamic ecology of interconnected elements and a multilayered network of pedagogical interdependencies. Learner agency and learner growth were promoted by the teacher and nurtured in relations with other students. There was ample quantitative and qualitative evidence from our case study that students' academic oral presentation skills significantly improved and they were more motivated and invested in their learning. Students also felt prepared for the challenges and opportunities in life beyond the classroom, transferring the acquired skills and autonomy to new contexts, because when students take an active role in their learning and believe in their own capacity to grow, they are more likely to maximize their potential and capitalize on any learning affordance.

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