



ACADEMIA DE STUDII ECONOMICE BUCUREȘTI
Sesiunea Internațională de Comunicări Științifice
*Youth on the move. Teaching languages for
international study and career-building*

București, 13-14 mai 2011

***GET YOUR POINT ACROSS – DEVELOPING STUDENTS’ ORAL
COMMUNICATION SKILLS***

Yolanda-Mirela CATELLY
Politehnica University Bucharest

Abstract

In our society graduates will have higher employability and career chances if they have developed a range of soft skills. Those connected with communication are among the most important ones, as they play an important role in any curriculum aiming to be efficient and to deliver highly qualitative products and services. The study presents the author’s experience in designing/teaching the oral communication module of a SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION COURSE IN ENGLISH. The rationale underlying the options made in the educational context, the information selected for/delivered within the course, as well as some original applications, are presented.

Key-words: soft skills, oral communication skills, scientific and technical communication, course design, employability, engineering graduates

1. Introduction – why oral communication?

This paper starts from the fact that in our new type of social, economic and political framework, those university graduates that have been exposed to the teaching of soft skills will have higher chances of employability.

Therefore, it may be of interest to discuss the way such skills – complementary to the strictly professional ones, known as *hard skills* – are integrated in the curricula of universities and taught, in the case discussed in this paper, in a technical university, the POLITEHNICA

University of Bucharest, therefore to engineering students. The focus will be firstly on the reason for introducing the quite often neglected oral communication skills in the CLIL type course designed and taught at master level by the author of the study – a *Scientific and Technical Communication* course. Then the approach to teaching oral communication skills in the particular context described is presented. Examples are provided and their rationale given, with the main purpose of sharing the author's personal experience with fellow teachers.

So, why oral communication in a master level course? One may argue that it is for lower levels of English tuition to cover this aspect. Nonetheless, as pointed out in quite many sources, such as [1], and particularly valid for the tertiary education level - as the phenomenon seems to have become quite general, besides the hard skills which are the natural result of their university education, graduates will have higher chances of employability if they can display a repertory of soft skills – the extra-professional ones, but so very much needed when young graduates begin their career with organizations that already operate in the international business milieu. It is therefore the academia's responsibility to answer these demands by reshaping the curricula to integrate the teaching of soft skills courses.

Among them, the skills connected with communication are really important, as part of what has been called *employability skills*. As maintained by Kwok [2], in American universities, the concept is not yet fully understood, with the obvious consequence that their graduates have not entirely acquired the range of abilities required for success on the market of jobs. Even more interesting, as it is shown in [2], if the university has included those skills in the curriculum, there are still situations where the graduates 'lack the awareness to articulate the types of skills learnt or developed in the classroom'. A potential solution, envisaged by Kwok [2] is that of integrating employability skills across the curriculum at university level, by implementing 'effective teaching practices such as promoting active learning' and 'using multiple strategies' in order to enhance the students' skills development process.

Some of the main features of oral communication a teacher should take into consideration in designing and teaching a course focused on developing the learners' ability of communicating orally are presented below.

Thus, as pointed out by Rahman [3], oral communication covers a variety of activities, ranging from formal presentations and up to participation in formal meetings, all specific to the sphere of activity of young graduates who have been hired by an organization, which expects them to be able to perform in a successful manner in such situations. All these concrete cases actually require the same effectiveness in transmitting 'facts, ideas, thoughts,

feelings and values’, as shown in [3]. Similarly, there is a continuous dialogue seen as an exchange of stimuli and responses with the purpose of influencing the partner in the communication process – a process that is quite complex and whose success is the result of a multitude of elements to be mastered as a whole.

This is not easily achieved without appropriate instruction, as pointed out in [3], as ‘not everyone is an effective communicator’. Therefore, it is by introducing adequate courses in the university curriculum that a not so gifted communicator can learn in order to become effective in communicating orally. We adhere to Rahman’s [3] view that one important aim of an oral communication course should be that of giving the students the necessary skills able to support them in becoming capable to adapt themselves to a variety of environments. The graduates should be able to reach an understanding of what ‘tools’ are most appropriate in expressing themselves, as well as of the best ways of using those tools in expressing themselves in real life situations.

The students must become familiar with the essence of what oral communication is; as put in [5], it ‘involves expressing and sharing ideas and information as well as influencing others through verbal and nonverbal symbols’, by its main functions: informing, persuading and entertaining.

2. How is oral communication approached? – A proposal

In the author’s educational context, a *Scientific and Technical Communication in English – STCE* course was designed – see [1] - and proposed to the master courses of two POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest faculties. In what follows, a synthetic presentation of the author’s intentions is sketchily given, inasmuch as it answers the question as to the manner of teaching soft skills at tertiary engineering education at a stage where such skills are not – yet – fully seen as essential for the graduates’ career success.

The main purpose of the STCE course has been to respond to a real need of the students in a very synthetic form, due to a severe time constraint, and against many other priorities to be included in the master course structure. The sampling of the (sub)skills to be taught and practised throughout the course and applications seminars was meant to cover the most relevant aspects of both written and oral communication that any professional of science and technology should be familiar with.

The main objective of the course is to provide the trainees the necessary support in developing the skills they will need in their professional activity at the C1 (Competent User) level according to the Common European Frame of Reference – CEFR. Both theoretical and

practical issues are covered, in activities ranging from conception and structuring, through analyzing and applying, and up to reporting.

We should perhaps mention here the fact that the STCE course also has a 'hidden agenda', consisting in the intention of providing the learners the necessary strategic repertory of language learning and using strategies able to support them at the post-course stage in continuing to study in an *autonomous* manner, so as to adapt themselves to the ever higher expectations of the professional setting in which they are supposed to evolve after graduation.

The general STCE course framework provides three distinct modules, which can be used in a flexible manner, in function of each concrete situation profile:

1. *ACCURACY OF LINGUISTIC SUPPORT IN SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION* – 3 parts
2. *WRITTEN COMMUNICATION* – 6 parts
3. *ORAL COMMUNICATION* – 3 parts. These are as follows:
 - *PRESENTING A WRITTEN PAPER IN A CONFERENCE*
 - *PARTICIPATING IN TECHNICAL DISCUSSIONS AND MEETINGS*
 - *MAKING AN ORAL PRESENTATION*

The STCE course *Oral Communication* module provides:

- the necessary guidelines on the manner of turning written content into an oral presentation, while emphasizing the main differences between the two forms of communication
- a range of communication strategies and functions of language (e.g. negotiating, accepting, contradicting, evaluating etc.), with a focus on the skills required in order to participate in scientific and technical professional activities
- samples of the most adequate phrases/expressions to be used in performing the various roles one professional may play in meetings of this type
- the sequence of presentation, starting from providing guidelines and examples, then advice as to designing, creating and using appropriate visual aids, and the delivery phase tips, which conclude the chain of steps under focus
- special emphasis on the stages of making efficient, eloquent and ethical oral presentations
- non-verbal communication - discussed in brief, as it plays a significant part in making successful presentations in international multicultural contexts.

3. The Oral Communication module – content and rationale

In what follows, a selective presentation of the Oral Communication three parts and the applications and assignments to them are given, and the rationale of including them in the STCE course is briefly explained.

As at tertiary level it is somehow assumed that the learners have acquired (even more than) the basics of the language, the teaching of speaking skills should be replaced by the teaching of *communication skills*, certainly based on the students' needs and in accordance with the established set of course objectives specific to the concrete situation.

Therefore, apart from the language used for communication, there are some other elements of oral communication the learners should be made aware of: style and register, awareness of the audience, the skills of active and reflexive listening, politeness, precision, conciseness, body language a.s.o. These are the general aspects covered in all the three parts of the *Oral Communication* module. While the course offers advice (checklists, tips) and examples, the applications were designed as tasks-based materials to complement the course input, by providing models of use, while the learners practise the appropriate lexis for such situations.

The model of instruction has a communicative core, but it also displays a strongly eclectic character, with activities that encourage the learners to discover their own path and form their oral communication skills while solving them. Various patterns of communication among the students are encouraged, providing the tasks that element of authenticity that can contribute to increasing the trainees' interest in solving them, as they perceive the task requirements as being quite similar to those in the real situations they may find themselves in after graduation.

The first unit - *PRESENTING A WRITTEN PAPER IN A CONFERENCE* – recreates the chain of stages a person should pass through in presenting a paper at a conference, from turning the written text of the paper into an oral presentation, generally a PowerPoint one, to designing appropriate visual aids and delivering it. With more advanced students (doctoral school), they were instructed to use their own scientific papers to create the oral presentation as an assignment, which added an element of veridicalness to the activity. Thus, the students became even more aware of their need to perform such a presentation at the level required by the international scientific community. In the case of the master courses, the trainees either used an article in their domain of scientific interest, or, in some cases, they created the oral

presentation based on an article conceived by them for the *Written Communication* module that preceded the *Oral Communication* one in the STCE course.

The sequence of tasks for the first unit comprised the following (tasks will be briefly presented, and the rationale will be given for them):

Task 1 requires the students to fill in one-item gaps with words provided in a list while reading a text that actually gave good advice on presentation making. Thus, a useful checklist is obtained by performing the task, which the students can use whenever they are required to make an oral presentation, as the items included refer to knowing your audience, researching for information to use in the presentation, organizing, structuring, writing and editing the text of the presentation, the manner of delivery and maintaining the audience interested in the presentation.

Task 2 requires a matching of the main parts of a presentation – introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion - and their headings, while Task 3 asks the students to recompose a list of DO'S and DON'TS about making oral presentations, thus inviting the learners to reflect on the process.

Task 4 presents a '7P' approach to the principles of public speaking:

- *Purpose:*
- *People :*
- *Place:*
- *Preparation :*
- *Planning:*
- *Personality:*
- *Performance:*

By matching the 7P key principles with their explanations, the students get a useful checklist of advice on aspects such as: the form of delivery best suited for a certain audience, purpose of presentation, good knowledge of the place logistics, visual aids appropriate to the aim and place of the presentation, pattern of the presentation – a natural flow of ideas and information, efficient manner of structuring the input, ways of collecting material that would help you deliver a presentation that should be associated with you, the presenter, in a positive manner, ways of demonstrating your charisma, competence and character to the audience.

In Task 5, the students are given a text providing a generic conference talk outline. As it is assumed that they have become more familiar with the topic, the gaps must be filled in

with words they are not given. Task 6 goes one step further, by asking the students to comment on a ‘decalogue’ of bad advice on making presentations, trying to draw the conclusions about what good advice would be.

The second part of the *Oral Communication module* refers to *PARTICIPATING IN TECHNICAL DISCUSSIONS/MEETINGS*. The course input covers expressing personal opinions, ideas, arguing etc. Similarly, it includes communication strategies/functions, such as: *negotiating, contradicting, evaluating, synthesizing* and so on.

The first five tasks in the applications to the course are based on the same idea of challenging the students to discover meaning on their own. Thus, in Tasks 1 and 2 (multiple-choice quizzes), they are invited to test themselves by answering two quizzes: the first is about one person’s *Meeting IQ*, and the second is a quiz on how to organize effective meetings. Such activities are as many good opportunities to involve the learners in actively acquiring the main ideas of the course and, what is equally important, to communicate with colleagues while justifying their answers.

Tasks 3 and 4 elicit students’ knowledge of the specific lexis used to express a range of functions, such as agreeing, summarizing, questioning etc. Indirectly, the students are thus familiarized with the specific portfolio of feelings, ideas, beliefs and so on, which they can expect to be asked to express in real life meetings, so the task is of an authentic type.

In teaching oral communication, simulations and role plays do play an important part. That is why a role play was included in the applications to this unit, based on a situation presented below:

Task 6 – A Role Play:

Situation: *Meeting of the Town Hall Council (in an urban settlement of about 300,000 inhabitants) to decide on the following question: Who will be the tenant of a 5,000 sqm plot of land belonging to the municipality, located in the neighbourhood of the town?*

Participants:

- The town mayor – to chair the meeting
- An entrepreneur proposing that a new petrol station and a car park be built on the empty plot of land
- An entrepreneur proposing to have a hypermarket be built on that land
- The representative of a Green Movement Organization – proposing that a park should be built on the same piece of land

- The secretary of the Board - to take the minutes
- Council members – their list of criteria in evaluating proposals:
 - *public interest in developing the area;*
 - *pollution problems;*
 - *efficiency in increasing living standard of population.*

Organization:

Preparation time for each role – approx. 5 minutes.

Council members can ask questions after each entrepreneur presents their proposals and they should finally support or reject proposals, providing arguments in favour of their opinions.

This is a relatively long activity, requiring time for preparation and development, and which can be recorded on video support for analysis of the students’ performance. The observers, playing the council members who finally decide who the winner = best presenter is, can be asked to design their observation criteria and the format of the observation sheet, which will get them even more involved in objectively assessing their peers’ level of oral communication competence.

The third unit is devoted to *MAKING A BRIEF ORAL PRESENTATION* and then to *MAKING AN ORAL PRESENTATION* . The course input provides:

- guidelines for making an effective, efficient, eloquent, and ethical oral presentation;
- elements of non-verbal communication;
- dealing with fear.

Off the cuff presentations (i.e. very short, perhaps just two-three minutes long, presentations on a given topic, for which the students do not have more than one minute time for preparation) are organized at first, with a view to giving the trainees the feeling and the anxiety of real presentations and to activate the course input. All the students are supposed to make such a brief presentation, and it could be noted that the performance of the last students to present was superior, as they might have learned a lot from their colleagues’ mistakes.

The delivery moment is anticipated by solving out a series of preparatory tasks, as follows.

In Task 1, the learners have to sort out two distinct sets of skills: (i) Skills to improve one's ability to deliver a talk, and (ii) Skills to improve one's listening capabilities – what they obtain is one more useful checklist for further presentation preparation.

Then, in Task 2, they start from a collaborative form of making oral presentations, which simulates real life situations: in pairs, the students sketch a very short oral presentation whose objective is to introduce the peer, as a person and as a professional, to the entire group attending the meeting. The task is still quite controlled, as the students receive some ideas to start from (personal background of the CV type, country of origin, professional interests and further career development intentions). They are also given the suggested evaluation format for the oral presentations of their peers:

Evaluated items:

- Task fulfilment (*was that an oral presentation?*)
- Verbal communication (*coherence, smooth flow, linguistic accuracy*)
- Non-verbal communication (*appropriate body language, posture, voice control, gestures*)

The final assignment comprises the following:

Task - *Each student will prepare and deliver a 10/12 - minute scientific oral presentation based on their own scientific research. Power point slides will be used - if appropriate, or any other type of visual aids the student will consider befitting. Students will make their presentations and then they will answer to questions from the audience. The presentation session will be taped for further feedback on the quality of the presentations. The other students are invited to observe and evaluate their peers' presentations based on the given template.*

The *Suggested Evaluation Format* covers the following items:

1. **Introduction:** Did the introduction capture your interest; was necessary background given; was a clear purpose conveyed
2. **Organization:** Was there a clear organization; were transitions between sections clear and effective; did the organization lead to a clear conclusion?
3. **Content:** Did the author support the points; was the supporting material relevant, up to date?
4. **Visual Aids:** Were visual aids used effectively and appropriately, carefully prepared?

5. **Conclusion:** Were key points reinforced; was a sense of closure provided; if appropriate, was a course of action proposed?

6. **Delivery:** Was the speaker natural, enthusiastic; did s/he speak clearly; were appropriate gestures, posture, expressions used?

7. **General Comments**

4. Open conclusions

So far the *Oral Communication* units have been taught for three years to a variety of master and doctoral students, whose common features consisted in the fact that they were all ready to be employed or already employed in the market of (inter)national organizations expecting from them to have a well developed range of communication skills.

Moreover, at the post-course stage, some of the students, in particular those from the doctoral school, actually asked the former teacher for the STCE course for advice in actually presenting papers in scientific conferences, while some others actually slipped a note of thankfulness to the teacher, showing that the course input has really been of help and that they have used the checklists and other materials in working on their presentations.

Feedback from the students, pointing out to the fact that they found the course useful, as well as feedback from potential employers that considered the course useful - even for the in-service training courses they wanted to organize, represent an incentive for its author to continue to improve the STCE course structure and be open to suggestions from fellow teachers who may wish to share from their own experience.

Bibliography

1. Catelly, Yolanda-Mirela, (2009). *Scientific and Technical Communication in English – Course Slides*, București: Editura Printech, ISBN 978-606-521-359-3
2. Kwok, Matthew, (2003), “Towards an Understanding of Employability Skills Development among University Graduates for Workplace Entry”, online at <http://umanitoba.ca/education/symposium03/documents/kwok03.pdf>
3. Rahman, M. Mojibur, (2010), “Teaching Oral Communication Skills: A Task-based Approach”, *ESP World*, Issue 1 (27), Volume 9, online at http://www.esp-world.info/Articles_27/Paper.pdf
4. The Australian Industry Group (Ai Group), (2007), *Graduate Employability Skills. Prepared for the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council. August 2007*, Commonwealth of Australia, ISBN: 0 642 77701 2, online at

<http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/E58EFDBE-BA83-430E-A541-2E91BCB59DF1/20214/GraduateEmployabilitySkillsFINALREPORT1.pdf>

5. University of Hawai`i at Mānoa, (2006-2008), *Oral Communication Focus*, online at <http://www.hawaii.edu/gened/oc/oc.htm>

Yolanda-Mirela Catelly - PhD (Bucharest University) and MEd (University of Manchester, UK). University Lecturer – POLITEHNICA University Bucharest – Department of Communication in Modern Languages. (Co-)authored three books and authored four books and over 90 scientific papers in (inter)national publications. Areas of scientific interest: language learning and using strategies, soft skills, CLIL, assessment, IT in education, course design.