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## **PRACTICING PROFESSIONAL ORAL PRESENTATIONS WITH BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS (ASE) STUDENTS. THE NECESSITY OF REMEDIAL TEACHING**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper aims to present the results of a comparative study on ASE students' perceptions regarding: 1. the usefulness, the relevance of practicing professional oral presentations during foreign language seminars, i.e. English, German and French, 2. the effectiveness and efficiency of oral presentations as a means of examination instead of the traditional final written test, and 3. the necessity of remedial teaching in this context. The data was collected from second year students, who already have the experience of being tested via oral presentations of projects, and the results will be interpreted comparatively, in order to see if there are any significant differences in students' perceptions, as their level of English/German/French is generally quite different.*

**Keywords:** oral presentations; student assessment; students' perceptions; remedial teaching.

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### ***1. Introduction***

#### ***1.1. Background***

During and after the COVID pandemic, together with tailoring seminar activities to make them fit for online teaching/learning, we, teachers, also experienced a paradigm change at the level of testing, of student assessment. The up-to-that-point customary final test became somehow questionable, while some of us even felt it was impossible to use any more. Ways of evaluating our students had to be reinvented, old methods adjusted, and oral presentations of projects seemed to be the winner. For our academic community (i.e. professors and students of Bucharest University of Economic Studies/ ASE București), more specifically for foreign language teachers in the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication/ Departamentul de Limbi Moderne și Comunicare în Afaceri, or briefly DLMCA, professional oral presentations had the double advantage of effectiveness and relevance for the trainees. The teacher had the possibility to access and grade individual work of students, to hear them speak, to check language quality as well as coherence, while the latter felt they practised something useful, something they will need to master later on in their career.

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From countless informal conversations with our groups of students, it became apparent that the same happened even at pre-academic, high school, even secondary school, level. A majority of teachers seemed to have decided on the usefulness of oral presentations as an effective form of evaluation, so they started using it, more often than not without adequate preparation. Students had to learn how to prepare for and how to deliver oral presentations while doing it, by trial and error.

In this context, we decided to further explore students' perceptions of the usefulness, the relevance of still practising professional oral presentations and using them as a means of assessment, and maybe the need for remedial teaching. Consequently, the objective of our study was to find out how students felt about being tested via oral presentations of projects and to compare our results across languages, namely English, German and French, to see if these perceptions differ with the language and with the language level.

### *1.2. Research Questions and Research Hypotheses*

Our initial questions were “What is our students' perception of the usefulness, the relevance of oral presentations practiced in class?” and “Do they consider oral presentations an effective, adequate means of evaluation?”, but they soon became more refined, as we tried to find out the reasons behind these perceptions and how they might, or should, affect our work as teachers in the future. So, we added questions such as “Would students welcome oral presentations as a form of evaluation in the future, or would they have them replaced by the traditional final, written test?”, “Are they aware of the advantages/disadvantages of both oral presentations and written tests as forms of evaluation?”, so “Is their choice an informed one, or is it in any way biased?”. Finally, “should we, teachers, consider students' perceptions in the decision-making process when we establish policies for the future, in this case testing?”.

Based on informal conversations with our students as well as classroom observation, we started from the hypothesis that students' predominant choice of oral presentations over written tests as a form of evaluation is probably a biased one. To explain, students will always tend to choose what they consider to be the easier way, and, although oral competencies do pose certain issues to some students, to the shy, introverted ones, or to those with a lower level of the foreign language, they still perceive this type of assignment as easier to handle, easier to prepare and deliver, than a written test. Another hypothesis was that most students will probably identify the need for further practice, for seminar activities to prepare them for the final assignment, for the oral presentations, and their need for a certain type of preparatory activity will depend on their level: those with a lower level of the foreign language (quite possibly more in the case of German and French) will opt for language exercises, while those with a higher level (a high percentage of the students enrolled in the English seminar) will demand more refined activities, such as watching and analysing presentations, analysing the effectiveness/appropriateness of their non-verbal language, or rhetorical exercises.

### *1.3. Research Method and Bias*

The principal research method was quantitative: a questionnaire was distributed to 126 International Business and Economics and FABIZ 2<sup>nd</sup> year students, who already have the experience of being evaluated via oral presentations (our groups of students in English/German/French and Business Communication who agreed to fill in the questionnaire) at the beginning of the new academic year (end of September-beginning of October). For triangulation purposes, a second method was used, a qualitative one, namely classroom observation / informal conversations with the same students, for more refined insights into their perceptions and opinions. Chronologically, the process actually started by classroom observation and informal conversations with our students last academic year, and it was continued with the quantitative research this year.

Although we had access to a limited number of respondents, who experienced oral presentations as a form of evaluation in high school and at academic level, as 1<sup>st</sup> year students, and although some of our groups overlapped (English – French one common group, English – German one common group), we

tried to reduce/eliminate bias both by triangulation and by cross-checking our findings comparatively between languages, i.e. English/German/French.

#### *1.4. Generalizability Issues and Relevance of Findings*

Due to the fact that this research study only analyses a limited number of questionnaires, as well as due to the similar profile of respondents (namely, 2<sup>nd</sup> year ASE students), our conclusions do not have a high degree of generalizability. Yet, our findings have the potential to prove valuable for Bucharest University of Economic Studies, for our academic community, as they will help both the professors and the decision-makers to identify a common thread in students' perceptions regarding a possible future official policy of the university, namely the potential adoption of professional oral presentations as a form of final evaluation, at least in the case of foreign languages seminars.

#### *1.5. Paper Structure*

Apart from the introduction, the paper will be divided in three more chapters, the Literature Review, meant to (re)define the concept of remedial teaching and its usefulness in our context, but also to see other practitioners' experiences of employing oral presentations as a means of assessment, Research findings and their analysis, where we shall try to see if the findings help us answer (all) the research questions. These will be followed by a brief section of recommendations and some conclusions. The last part of the paper consists of one appendix, namely the English version of the questionnaire distributed to our students for the purpose of data collection.

## **2. Literature review**

Oral presentations have been present in the literature for quite a while, but many authors focus on best practice in teaching them (Rusu 2019, Bovée and Till 2016, Duarte 2009), on advice on how to prepare for and how to best deliver oral presentations. Textbooks have been developed that include whole chapters focused on professional oral presentations (*Business Class, In Company, Market Leader*, to name only a few), while newer means of education, such as podcasts or vlogs abound on the Internet (a quick search reveals 406,000 results for “teaching oral presentations”). After such a long while and so many available resources, older and newer, it is not our purpose to talk about teaching oral presentations once more.

Many of the authors who research oral presentations as taught in ESP classes focus on different ways to assess and/or to give feedback to students. van Naerssen (1987) for instance, reminds us in this context that this skill and other oral skills are particularly important, because

In designing and evaluating any English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program, it should be remembered that the students are not training to become English majors or English teachers. ESP students generally do not have the time or the motivation to become “masters” of the target language. ESP students simply want to communicate their ideas to their colleagues. The “consumers” of their English will be their professional peers, native English-speaking colleagues, or other colleagues who use English as a second or foreign language for specific purposes. (219)

Indeed, ESP students specialize in different areas, not in language as such, which creates a different context for the teacher of foreign languages.

To understand the wider context, perhaps we should keep in mind EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction), as well, as it has recently become a solid challenger of ESP worldwide. Cosgun and Hasirci (2017), Ulla et al (2022) speak about the importance of EMI nowadays, about “curriculum reform” or “the impact of EMI on students' language proficiency”. As far as our study is concerned, we did not focus on EMI students, but on ESP students exclusively, although Bucharest University of Economic Studies has several programs where English is used as a medium of instruction.

Xuan Van Ha et al (2021) focus on “oral corrective feedback” and the relationship between teachers’ and students’ perceptions of oral corrective feedback. Their study shows that “both teachers and students are positive about feedback efficacy and necessity”, that they value explicit feedback and that, although teachers prefer to delay feedback, the analyzed students stated that they preferred immediate feedback, which is quite interesting in the context of a communicative approach to teaching languages, that has been with us for a few decades now.

Alternatively, the psychological implications of experiencing various emotions, such as anxiety or even fear to speak, to use the foreign language, are also worth looking into, as well as the ways in which they might affect students in online classes, but they represent the object perhaps of a future, interdisciplinary, study. Muluaem et al (2022) focused on “academic emotions as mediators”, while other researchers have started, of course more recently, in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic, to focus their attention on “Strategies for reducing EFL learners’ foreign language anxiety in online classes” (Yawen Liu, Jian Wang, 2023), or on ways to exploit new media for the purpose of remedial teaching (Šimůnková, 2013). In our context as well, i.e. post-COVID pandemic, oral presentations have gained in importance, as they had to replace, at least in the case of foreign languages, traditional ways of testing, of assessment. Although this is not institutional policy, it is common practice, as many of our colleagues perceived oral presentations as a more appropriate, a more efficient way of testing students’ progress.

In the context we focused on, i.e. teaching oral presentations at an academic level, we could not notice much interest in remedial teaching, though. Remedial teaching started in the 1960s as a set of activities designed to help especially primary school pupils who struggled with acquiring basic skills such as reading, writing or arithmetic (Kasran et al, 2012), but it soon evolved into remedial programs at an academic level, namely programs meant to help students improve skills that were prerequisite to the study program they had enrolled in and that they did not master (Onditi Luoch, 2014). At this level, remedial teaching has been perceived as controversial, as in some countries, in some universities remedial courses are paid by the students/parents. Our own institution, Bucharest University of Economic Studies has a wide offer of remedial courses for our students, free of any charges, though. Another difference is that these remedial courses are dedicated to those students who struggle in what is generally perceived as more abstract, more difficult subjects, such as Mathematics or Statistics, and they unfold throughout the three academic years, not only prior to the beginning of classes, while enrollment is optional and voluntary, namely students opt for one such program themselves, when they feel they need extra work or supplementary help from the professors.

Still at an academic level, Khouyibaba (2015) speaks about the challenges to remedial teaching. Of all the possible issues that she lists, the last one, the lack of self-confidence is also likely to affect our students’ performance in oral presentations, and it should be addressed, together with language issues, in our remedial teaching sessions.

Students entering the university come from different backgrounds and have different problems. There are those who have never been taught how to face challenges; those who only know how to follow algorithms or even *formulas* to solve problems, never questioning why this method or algorithm works; those who do not know how to study or how to be more efficient; those who completely depend on the help of tutoring services; those who are completely unable to do any math work without the aid of a calculator; and those who simply lack self-confidence. (927)

Aware as we are of the meaning of “remedial teaching” in the literature, we would like to expand its meaning – and we shall use this meaning henceforth – to include all types of activities carried out by teachers of a particular academic course whenever they perceive that students have difficulty in acquiring a particular skill, where remedial activities may be included in a particular course and not just as a separate program. It should encompass all kinds of post-teaching in the aftermath of an assignment, in our case of oral presentations, which seem to require constant work and improvement. Moreover, in our understanding, not only some of the lower level students need it, but all students, so the concept of “remedial teaching” as we are going to use it in this paper refers to all teaching

activities that follow an assignment, with the objective of improving future performance, based on, starting from the feedback for a prior activity, equally necessary to all students in our context (i.e. foreign languages and business communication, where the level of performance is diverse and oscillates with the taught language, with groups, and, in time, even with individuals).

Remedial teaching, as explained above, is particularly relevant in the case of foreign language classes, where students often come back to the same type of content or skill (in our case oral presentations) again and again throughout their three years of academic studies. Moreover, if oral presentations gain in importance, as they are often used as a means of evaluation, students should benefit from all possible help to improve their ability to deliver them. On the other hand, we want to emphasize the necessity of both pre-teaching before an important assignment that requires specific, complex skills (such as OPs), and remedial teaching, for the purpose of constant improvement.

Consequently, we aim to grasp the necessity of remedial teaching at least in our context, i.e. ESP (English for Special Purposes) or EMI (English as a medium of instruction) taught in a university of economic studies, as this context implies: 1. that our students are not philologists, not specializing in English *per se*, so their level may not always be advanced and 2. that more applied, more practical skills such as oral presentations gain in importance as they are perceived as useful in their future careers, therefore they should be studied thoroughly and improved significantly by the end of their undergraduate studies.

A particularly interesting detail to add to this theoretical part of our paper is that remedial teaching should always be, and indeed is in our case, complemented by what Kleppin called “correction and repair of errors” (1998, 82-83): while correction involves students’ taking over of the version suggested by the teacher, in the case of “repair of errors” the teacher offers help in the formulation of students’ ideas, so that the students’ communication intention is not altered. Since we do not want to theorize here the correction of errors, we limit ourselves to mentioning the students’ appreciation of the discussions at the end of each presentation regarding its respective strengths and weaknesses, of the suggestions for future improvement, where grammatical or vocabulary errors were often discussed, in such a way that students’ motivation was not negatively affected (Kalender, Klimaszuk, 2008), but on the contrary, that they have the opportunity to become aware of the respective errors (Böschel, Wagner, 2014, 133).

### **3. Research findings**

The 128 questionnaires received from our students are divided as follows: 54 for German, 40 for English and 34 for French. They refer to the students’ perceptions regarding experiencing oral presentations in class for each of the three languages in turn.

For question 1, “How would you consider your experience of practising professional oral presentations during the Business English/German/French seminars?”, the majority of students considered it as “very relevant”, or “relevant”, as the graph below indicates (German 52%, English 60% and French 44% of the respondents labelled their experience as “very relevant”, while German 46%, English 40% and French 56% considered it “relevant”).

Question 2 was open ended and it aimed to provide the justification for the answers received in question 1. In the case of oral presentations during English seminars, answers revolve around the usefulness of practising public speaking, and all its consequences, namely overcoming the nervousness, even fear, of speaking to an (un)known public, opening up and accepting the challenge of speaking in public, enhancing communication in general (the capacity to communicate effectively), and speaking skills in particular, but also non-verbal communication. Some respondents also mentioned a confidence boost and personal development and mentioned the fact that all these will be relevant later in their professional lives.



For German, students also mentioned improving their public speaking abilities, overcoming nervousness, improving their communication in German in general, their non-verbal language, but, in addition, they also mentioned the possibility to learn how to work in a team, improving their vocabulary in general and specialized, business vocabulary in particular, and also developing their creative capacities. Additionally, the possibility to select their own topic within the group was perceived as beneficial to their capacity to take decisions, to establish priorities and, last but not least, to better self-knowledge.

In the case of French, similar answers were found: students stressed the importance of improving communication in general, oral communication in particular, improving public speaking and overcoming nervousness, but just like in the case of German, they also mentioned improving vocabulary and also pronunciation, and also the possibility to be creative or to work in a team. Not less importantly, some students considered it to be very important to be taken out of their comfort zone, to get a confidence boost, for the purpose of self-development. Oral presentations are also considered to be important as a skill to be used later on, in their professional lives.

Question 3 referred to the degree of difficulty of oral presentations (preparation for, documentation, and also delivery). Although the percentages are slightly different across the three languages, the general tendency is similar. Most students considered this activity as not very difficult, as “acceptable”. Surprisingly, the highest percentage does not belong to English, but to German (English 65%, German 71% and French 50%). Additionally, the next contoured category of students believed that oral presentations are “difficult, but not impossible to achieve” (English 32.5%, German 23% and French 44%). No students in the German seminars considered this activity to be difficult and only 2.5% (English), 2.9% (French) labelled it as “difficult”, as one can observe in the graph below.

Question 4, “What seminar activities would you like to practise further/to introduce in the Business English/German/French seminars in order to facilitate your preparation/delivery of oral presentations?”, revealed the following answers: while 47.5% of the respondents chose language exercises, i.e. grammar and vocabulary, for English, the percentage is higher for German (63%) and French (73%). Diction, pronunciation, has lower percentages for English (37.5%) and German (30%) and a higher percentage for French (76.5%). Watching and analysing professional presentations had a higher percentage for English (50%) and German (57%) and lower for French (23.5%), while practising the structure of a presentation had similar percentages: 57.5% (English), 48% (German), 50% (French). Finally, the last suggested activity, practising non-verbal language obtained the highest percentage in the case of English (47.5%), as compared to German (19%) and French (32%).

Question 5 was the only yes/no question and it referred to the adequacy and effectiveness of using oral presentations as a form of evaluation. All students opted for oral presentations as a means of assessment in the case of English, and only a minority considered it not appropriate in the case of German (7%) and French (5%).

Question 6 focuses on the advantages of oral presentations as a form of evaluation. Although percentages vary across the three languages, the most prominent advantages seem to have been perceived as: the opportunity to practise public speaking, to deal with, to control nervousness, anxiety (82.5% English, 84.5% German, 44% French), the possibility to be more creative (80% English, 84.5% German, 55% French), the possibility of teamwork (71% German, 73.5% French, vs only 27.5% English), or objective grading, i.e. grading of individual effort, impossibility of fraud, of cheating (52.5% English, 52% German, vs only 20.5% French). One practical aspect, the shorter period of an oral presentation as compared to a written test, was also appreciated (32.5% English, 44% German, 50% French). Practising non-verbal language seems to be appreciated only in the case of English (52.5%), and to a much lower extent in the case of German (25%) and French (17.5%), while the predictability of a presentation seems to be appreciated more by students of French (53%). The possibility to obtain a higher grade (27.5% English, 38.5% German, 55% French) and motivation/competitiveness (25% English, 23% German, 9% French) do not seem to rank very high in students’ preferences.

Question 7 is meant to explore students' perceptions of the advantages of written forms of evaluation. The biggest advantage is considered the possibility to reflect on one's answers for a while before writing them (60% English, 61.5% German, 61.5% French), while the possibility to return to and correct a previous answer comes very close (52.5% English, 50% German, 70.5% French). The other suggested advantages, such as the fact that grades represent a clear sum of items checked by the teacher (25% English, 15% German, but 50% French), the possibility to practise writing skills (55% English, 20.5% French), thoroughly revising the whole subject matter before the test (7.5% English, 9.5% German, 11.5% French), or the shorter overall evaluation time (17.5% English, 25% German, 23.5% French) did not obtain very high percentages.

Question 8 was an open-ended question, meant to collect suggestions for the teacher. The most notable of these revolve around: group work (English), more interaction, interactive games, or the possibility to select one's topic (German), more discussions with the whole class (French).

### *3.1. Interpretations of research findings*

As expected, the majority of students considered the activity of practising oral presentations in class as relevant or very relevant, with one exception (1.9% of students in the case of German), who considered it as not very relevant. This is quite possibly associated with the perceived usefulness/advantages of this activity either as a form of evaluation, or as an activity in their future careers.

The fact that, in question 2, some respondents associated practising oral presentations, public speaking and personal development suggests that this type of exercise is perceived as more than just a form of evaluation, and that at least some of them take a more mature, long-term view regarding the benefits of this class activity.

Surprisingly, in question 3, only very few students considered oral presentations to be very difficult, none in the case of German and only 2.5% in English and 2.9% in French. This seems to indicate that thorough preparation during the foreign language seminar is perceived as helpful by the students.

Similarly, the fact that, in question 4, answers were polarized in the sense that students gave more weight to work on language as such, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, in the case of German and French and more to complex activities, such as presentation watching and analysis, working on the non-verbal language in the case of English seems to indicate the fact that we can associate level and activity selection. In the case of German and French, students' level tends to be lower than that of students of English, hence their choices.

The fact that there were some exceptions in question 5, i.e. students who considered oral presentations not appropriate as a form of evaluation in the case of German (7%) and French (5%) can reasonably be associated with their lower level. However, let us note they only represent a minority.

Questions 6 and 7 were meant to check if students' choice of oral presentations as a form of evaluation over the traditional written test is an informed choice, or rather, a biased one. The majority of students seem well aware of the advantages (and implicitly the disadvantages) of both forms of evaluation, although what they consider to be an advantage differs from what teachers consider to be an advantage. Despite all this, they would go for what they perceived as the easier of the two, which seems to confirm our initial hypothesis.

## **4. Recommendations**

Based on both our classroom observations, informal conversations with our students, and the results of the questionnaire as presented above, we believe our future teaching activities would be more productive if we observed the following list of recommendations:

- Initial needs analysis is necessary before starting preparation for oral presentations.
- Thorough preparation of oral presentations, especially in the case of 1<sup>st</sup> year students, but also in the case of 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, is essential, and it should be based on the needs analysis.
- Remedial teaching for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students should always be taken into account, as oral presentations represent, as many other activities, a type of skill that can and should constantly be improved.
- More stress on language is necessary for lower-level students (especially in the case of German and French, but not exclusively).
- More stress on watching and analysing oral presentations is necessary in the case of higher-level students in order to increase the level of their motivation (especially in the case of English, but not exclusively).
- It is also necessary to practice oral presentation structure and connectors, as well as non-verbal language regardless of students' level, for enhanced coherence.
- Feedback at the end of the activity is always necessary.

## 5. Conclusions

To sum up, our study seems to confirm the importance of practising professional oral presentations with our students, both in order to use it effectively as a means of assessment, and with a view to their need for this skill in their future professional lives. The level of language, quite different across the three studied languages, English, German and French, is likely to affect both students' perceptions of the difficulty of this activity, and their selection of preparatory activities, identified as necessary.

Remedial teaching is important in the case of oral presentations, whenever we identify the need for further teaching with 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year students, but not more important than initial teaching, especially with 1<sup>st</sup> year students, and the selection of preparatory activities should be made according to the level of the students, which is very likely to differ among languages (English – higher level vs. German and French – lower level) and among students, sometimes even within the same group.

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## *Appendix*

### *Questionnaire*

#### *Practising Professional Oral Presentations with Bucharest University of Economics (ASE) Students. The Necessity of Remedial Teaching*

1. How would you consider your experience of practising professional oral presentations during the Business English/German/French seminars?
  - a. very relevant, very useful
  - b. relevant, useful
  - c. not very relevant, not very useful
  - d. irrelevant
2. Explain your answer to question 1.
3. How do you assess the degree of difficulty of this activity (preparation, documentation, delivery, etc.)?
  - a. very difficult
  - b. difficult, but not impossible to achieve
  - c. pretty simple
  - d. simple
4. What seminar activities would you like to practise further/to introduce in the Business English/German/French seminars in order to facilitate your preparation/delivery of oral presentations? You may choose more than one answer from the list below.
  - a. language exercises (grammar, vocabulary)
  - b. diction, pronunciation exercises
  - c. watching and analysing professional oral presentations (TED talks, etc.)
  - d. practising the structure of a professional oral presentation (compulsory parts, connectors)
  - e. practising non-verbal language
  - f. others:
5. Do you consider oral presentations a more efficient/useful/adequate means of evaluation than a written test?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
6. What advantages do you think oral presentations have as a form of evaluation? You may choose more than one answer from the list below.
  - a. objective grading (grading of individual effort, impossibility of fraud, of cheating)
  - b. the opportunity to obtain a higher grade
  - c. the thorough preparation of a single topic
  - d. the possibility to be more creative
  - e. the opportunity to practise public speaking, to deal with, to control nervousness, anxiety
  - f. the opportunity to practise non-verbal language
  - g. the possibility of teamwork (team oral presentations)
  - h. feeling motivated, wishing to compete with peers
  - i. its shorter (5-10 minutes per student)
  - j. others:
7. What would be, in your opinion, the advantages of written evaluation?
  - a. grades represent a clear sum of items checked by the teacher
  - b. practising writing
  - c. the possibility to reflect on one's answers for a while before writing them

- d. the possibility to return to and correct a previous answer
  - e. the possibility to focus on your work in silence
  - f. thoroughly revising the whole subject matter before the test
  - g. shorter overall evaluation time (one seminar for the whole group)
  - h. others:
8. Suggestions for the teacher