

Thou Shall Use PowerPoint: Students' Use and Abuse of PowerPoint in an ESL Oral Presentation Course



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Biography

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Abstract

It is often reported today that the use of power point is the in-thing in speech presentations as well as in teaching at least in higher education. This technology is gradually taking over from other visual aids such as over-head projectors, flip charts, boards, videos and films. And as Keller (2003) rightly puts it in the title of his paper: "*Killing me Microsoftly: Almost nobody speaks in public anymore without using PowerPoint*". It is like a commandment *thou shall use PowerPoint* in your presentations.

In this paper I examine critically the use and abuse of PowerPoint in an oral presentation course offered at the University of Botswana. In this course, students are often encouraged to use PowerPoint technology in their presentations as part of their life-long skills to the extent that it may be frowned upon when a student fails to employ it. I collected data through an observation and students' questionnaire of four groups of an undergraduate oral presentation course. The data was analysed qualitatively and it was found that quite a large percentage of the students lacked the skills for using this technology hence they abused it. I also found that there were a few of them who used it appropriately. Finally, it is proposed that PowerPoint technology should be seen as an aid to effective presentations and a replacement for the presenter. It should therefore be used with caution.

Introduction

Oral presentation is an integral part of students' learning skills in Higher education. This is in addition to writing skills, which they have to acquire in order to succeed in their studies. Students are expected to be able to contribute to class discussions, group work and present their individual projects to the class. In some institutions, oral or speech presentation is taught as a topic in a communication course, and in others as a whole course. At the University of Botswana, students are trained to be competent in academic literacy and in speech presentation as part of those skills required for their academic work and future careers. Speech presentation forms part of their courses and in the department of communication skills, it is a separate course that runs throughout a whole semester (14 weeks).

Oral presentation is taught as a topic in a first year course in communication and study skills, but as a whole course at the post-year one level at the University of Botswana. The course is intended to help students develop skills that are appropriate for presenting information orally. In the *Oral Presentation course* I teach students the basic skills that are the mark of an educated and competent person, skills by which students will be evaluated later in their lives. In addition to developing and polishing their presentation skills, I teach them how to compose meaningful and coherent messages, to adapt their messages to particular situations and audiences, to conduct responsible research, to argue and engage opposing viewpoints constructively, and to develop critical and constructive listening skills. The skills learned in this course also have personal benefits, such as promoting individual achievement in school, work, and life in general.

I also concentrate on the effective use of audio and visual aids that promote listeners'

comprehension and at the same time help arouse and sustain their interest in the subject. Students are taught to develop visual aids (PowerPoint slides, charts and graphs). I make them appreciate the fact that visual aids should be used to focus the attention of the audience, reinforce the verbal message and to stimulate interest. I always remind my students that effective presentations are people-centered, not media-centered. While the media can certainly help, it is the presenters' interaction and rapport with the audience that makes the difference between an effective or ineffective presentation.

Consequently, the course deals with the preparation and use of visual, and/or audio visual aids in oral presentations, voice projection and other linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours necessary for effective communication. It is assumed that by the end of the course, students should be able to appreciate the value of oral communication in society and work situations; develop skills for presenting information to different audiences; develop skills for gathering information relevant to selected topics; develop skills for planning and presenting information orally. The course, which covers a semester lasts (14) fourteen weeks and is taught in groups. Each group comprises twenty-five students. The course entails Self-introductory speech presentations, Informative speech presentations, persuasive speech presentations, and Ceremonial speech presentations,

The course focuses on such issues as choosing the topic; gathering information on the topic; determining the objectives of the presentation; defining the audience; organisation of material for effective presentation; preparing visual aids; deciding on presentation strategies (e.g. use of slides, OHP's power point, video, multimedia, posters, radio, tape) and how to use them effectively. In delivering the presentation, attention is paid to voice quality: pronunciation, intonation, selection of appropriate communication strategies; engaging the audience: maintaining eye contact, asking for feedback, offering feedback, and maintaining confidence.

In addition to developing and polishing their presentation skills, students are taught how to compose meaningful and coherent messages, to adapt their messages to particular situations and audiences, to conduct responsible research, to argue and engage opposing viewpoints constructively, and to develop critical and constructive listening skills. The course conceptualizes oral presentation as "participative—a sharing of information and ideas aimed at increasing understanding and shaping values, beliefs, and behavior" (Osborn & Osborn 2005). I stress the importance of responsible knowledge as basic to all public speaking, and focus attention on the ethical and social responsibilities of speakers.

Finally, I impress upon students the possible abuses of stylistic techniques, supporting materials, proofs, and arguments so that they might avoid committing them in their own speeches, and better detect their presence in the messages to which they are exposed.

Assessment of the course

The mode of assessment of the course is done in two ways: one minor presentation of ten minutes duration and one major of twenty-five minutes. Each presentation was followed by comments and a discussion. The assessment involves students' peer assessment on one hand and lecturers' assessment on the other hand. The presentation is based on a 20-point scale assessment format

under six sections categorised as follows:

1. *Speaking skills*: speed/pace, intelligibility, volume/pitch;
2. *Body language*: eye contact, gestures, posture, movement, dress;
3. *Presentation of information*: introduction, development, conclusion; detail, relevance, accuracy, clarity. knowledge of subject matter; confidence; time management.
4. *Use of visual aids*: appropriate to topic/illustration, timing, readability.
5. *Language*: appropriateness/range of vocabulary, expression/fluency.
6. *Dealing with the audience*: rapport, inter-activeness, probing, handling questions.

Why PowerPoint in students' speech presentation

I decided to investigate the use of PowerPoint as a visual aid in my students' oral presentation for two reasons. First, from the discussions I had with some faculty colleagues previously on the issue of students' presentations, it was obvious that they believed that no speech presentation can be regarded as complete and interesting unless PowerPoint technology is employed as one of the strategies of delivery. Some even suggested that students who failed to use PowerPoint should be penalized. Second, I observed during faculty seminars and workshops, some inadequacies in the use of PowerPoint by some faculty colleagues who have previously insisted that students should use this technology in their presentations.

Some views on PowerPoint use

PowerPoint is a widely used presentation programme that originated in the world of business but has now become commonplace in the world of educational technology. PowerPoint is an application for creating and delivering presentation. It was originally developed for public speaking and it seems to have effectively worked in the business circle. Its use provides a better way of communicating information to the presenters. Many teachers believe that students use PowerPoint presentations as a productive learning activity (Mason & Hylnka, 1998; Alster, 2002; Williams, 2004). As PowerPoint presentation software has been marketed to business and academic audiences with the promise that it will enable users to "work smarter" and make more "professional" presentations; many professionals have enthusiastically embraced PowerPoint as an instructional tool that "enhances instruction and motivates audience active participation" (Harrison, 1998:9).

Some critics, however, argue that the software's rigid format "usually weaken[s] verbal and spatial reasoning, and almost always corrupt[s] statistical analysis" (Tufte, 2003:3). Within the educational context, opinions as to its use range from highly supportive to significantly negative (Szabo & Hastings, 2000; Lowry, 2003; Williams, 2004). One of the major problems is that its current use is frequently limited to an information transmission mode, often with excessive content, a usage that obscures the wider potential for diverse professional (Worley & Dyrud 2004a, b). It thus becomes simply an alternative form of presenting largely text-based material that used to be delivered using flip chart and board in business circle. This makes little use of the new and flexible opportunities offered by use of PowerPoint within the business world.

PowerPoint is also noted for its use in organizing and reorganizing information efficiently so that audience see the structure of the presentation, providing more time for listening and comprehending so that audience time is used effectively. It provides enhanced legibility and readability; illustrates concepts with pictures and other multimedia merging text, graphics, sound, multimedia offering control and visual dynamics. (See Vik 2004; Dufrene & Lehman' 2004). Furthermore, PowerPoint allows the presenter easily to modify/enhance slides and notes; allows presenters to face their audience; and presenting outlines of information. It is thus an excellent aid for oral or speech presentation since it will enable presenters to demonstrate such skills as pace, eye contact, body language, which are very crucial to effective speech presentation.

This paper provides an evaluation of the use of the PowerPoint in student's oral presentation course at the University of Botswana and the problems associated with its use. I suggest some key pedagogical decisions that should be considered in an attempt to improve its use so that students can achieve efficiency in their presentation skills. I also wish to emphasize that I am not advocating its compulsory adoption under all circumstances by all students, since there are other aids that can also be used to enhance effective presentations.

Methodology

Questionnaires with close and open questions were administered to four groups (of 25 students each) of an oral presentation course made up of a total of 100 students. Some of the questions asked sought to provide answers to such issues as students' training in PowerPoint presentation use; PowerPoint as an effective tool in presentations; the role of PowerPoint in promoting presenter-audience interaction; its strengths and weaknesses; whether PowerPoint makes students better presenters or not; and suggestions on how its use could be improved. (See appendix A for details). In addition, lecturers who facilitated the presentations and took part in the assessment observed each of the students' sessions made useful comments and these were analyzed. Finally, comments made by students during the discussion of each of the presentations were also analyzed. The analysis was done quantitatively and descriptively. I also observe academic presentations at seminars, conferences and workshops, focusing on their use of PowerPoint as a tool for enhancing their speaking.

Analysis and discussion of students' responses to the use of PowerPoint

Analysis of students' responses to the questionnaire indicates that only a few of them (23%) have

received formal training in the use of PowerPoint. They received the training in the core subject areas, e.g. Information science, Computer science, Nursing Education, and Institute of Health Sciences before they were admitted to the University of Botswana. The majority of the students 77% got their exposure to the use of PowerPoint through their colleagues and friends or by interacting with computer programmes during their study time. On the need for training in the use of PowerPoint, 95% of the students felt there is the need for it. They explained that PowerPoint is a specialised computer skill to be learnt, hence they need to be taken through the processes involved in the preparation of the aid and how to use it during presentations. Some of the students said they were even *scared of using the software* because of its complexity.

Good uses of PowerPoint

On what they felt about the role of PowerPoint in topic organisation, majority of the students (87%) were of the view that the software helps presenters to organize their presentations. Some said *“It is becoming increasingly important to be able to use it successfully in presentations at the university and workplace; as well as to be able to use it as an aid to presentations and not mainly to read through the slides and show-off “*. Majority of the students (84%) indicated that PowerPoint support the content of presentations and makes them very interesting. Some said:” *Points were made visible and in logical form. PowerPoint is good for illustrations. It is clear and grabs audience attention. It is good for highlighting the points in the presentation“*. Others said that it is interesting, especially animation application to background, which tends to generate interest in some topics e.g. ***places of attraction in Botswana***. *“Bright colours make one interested in the topic”*. *PowerPoint allows presenters to put in pictures at a time. It makes content readable. The slides contain what was going to be presented”*. *It is very visual and makes audience anxious to see the next slide*, some students commented. Most of the students were of the view that PowerPoint could make presentations interesting if there are illustrations or pictures to reinforce the topic.

Students (92%) believe that PowerPoint makes the audience focus on the presentations. It is easily understandable more than other visual aids; makes concepts real. Other strengths of the use of PowerPoint observed by students include the fact that it helps the presenter to manage time; easy to elaborate points; attract attention and keep high concentration; makes audience pay attention to the presentation; reinforces the topic presented. *“PowerPoint also enables readability of content; helps as a guide; helps presenters to remember the most important points; shows clearly by illustration what is being presented. Audience can see the illustrations and understand the message better”*, some students asserted. Reinforce presentation skills; enhance audience understanding.

In their further responses to open-ended questions, students mentioned a number of aspects of the presentations that they found useful and enjoyable. Many students emphasized the appeal of the system to visual-style learners. One student said *“I am a visual learner more than an auditory learner so it is helpful to see a visual presentation that gives me better understanding of what other students were presenting. Each presentation was very interesting.”* Some students mentioned the superiority of the color projection system, which in

some cases was clearer than transparencies, particularly in the case of photographs.

Some of the abuses of PowerPoint

A large number of the students (74%) were of the view that PowerPoint does not enhance presenter-audience interaction. In their own words: *“It makes presenters concentrate too much on the screen/slides rather than focus on the audience. Makes audience to concentrate too much on PowerPoint instead of listening”*. Some added that *“to some presenters, PowerPoint did all the presentations. Presenters just read what is in the slides. Most of the presentations were limited to information transmission with excessive content. Sometimes too many animations; colour effects become a distraction to the presentation”*. In addition, they noted that information contained in the slides is too abstract; boring and disorganised; *audience focused on the presentation especially those with colourful illustrations, but lost focus when the writing was too much; audience focused on PowerPoint instead of paying attention to the presenter*, observed some students.

They also noted that presenters do not know how to put information/animations properly. Other weaknesses observed include the fact that audience do not listen but rather focus on the PowerPoint; presenters focused on PowerPoint and ignored the use of non-verbal communication and other important features of oral presentation; presenters lack poor eye contact, use of body language, interaction with the audience; concentrate mainly on what is in the PowerPoint. Audience asks questions on the content of the presentations and ignored the style and language of the presenter. They also remarked that *“presenters tend to read word for word most of the time instead of presenting extemporaneously; they lack the knowledge of the topic; read fast; and the audience was unable to grasp the message because of the fast pace. PowerPoint was not used as a guide; Presenters relied on the PowerPoint to talk for them; audience did not listen but drew conclusions from the slides. Some information was omitted. Audience was dissatisfied especially when time is of essence”*. The students' responses to their colleagues' presentations corroborated previous findings on Dutch students' responses to PowerPoint use. See Worley & Dyrud, 200a, b).

The students made some suggestions on how their use of PowerPoint can be improved. They include *“write important notes and speak on them; use animation and colour moderately; every student should be trained on how to use PowerPoint; PowerPoint should serve as an alternative aid and not as a requisite; PowerPoint can be very good if combined with presenter's talking. PowerPoint should be used only when necessary”*.

Lecturers/assessors observations of students' oral presentations

Observation that lecturers made during the process of the presentations indicate that the most common abuses in PowerPoint use include excessive detail so that audience need not be active during delivery; slides are visually poor and/or boring; too much text is put on a slide detracting from its legibility; excessive use of graphics; content often unmodified from an earlier non-PowerPoint presentation thus failing to make use of the advantages offered. There was a tendency to go too fast among the presenters simply because of the ease of delivery of the

material.

Lecturers/assessors also observed that many courses at the University of Botswana now require students to give presentations as a part of the course, and generally this results in the use of PowerPoint presentations. Frequently these are requested without giving students the appropriate training. The use of PowerPoint presentations by students undoubtedly offers the opportunity for development of a valuable transferable skill but its use in that context has not been well developed at the University of Botswana and indeed in many higher institutions in Africa.

Lecturer-assessors further observed that PowerPoint takes too much control away from the presenter. It makes it too easy for them to start the presentation with PowerPoint instead of starting with ideas and using PowerPoint to reinforce them. Just like the students, the lecturers also found that the software actually impedes attention. It lends itself to unnecessary competition.

Lecturers further observed that PowerPoint too easily becomes a replacement for the presenter, not reinforcement; and instead of a visual aid for the speaker, the speaker becomes an audio aid for the slides. This strips the presentation of some of its most essential appeals. In addition, they noted that presenters rely too much on the slides for structure; emphasizing that clear structure should still be part of the verbal presentation even with visual aids. The aids should reinforce the structure, not replace it. This is particularly troublesome for student presentations since students need to learn how to communicate structure verbally without visuals.

A researcher once observed that “presenters fail to establish ethos, their most powerful appeal” (Allan 2003). He defines ethos as the personal appeal of the speaker, which involves both verbal and nonverbal elements of the message and must be carefully managed for a presentation to succeed. With PowerPoint use in students’ presentation in this study, however, many of the elements that establish ethos are blunted or negated. Presenters did not look at the audience and the audience did not look at the speaker. The subtle nonverbal cues are lost such as eye-contact, posture in the students’ presentations.

Another observation made by the lecturers is the failure of equipment and not making alternative plans for coping in such event e.g. backup overheads or alternative activities. Technical problems include equipment failure: refusal of any component of the system to work as expected. File corruption caused by magnetic or physical damage so that the presentation will not run. Incompatible media was another problem: some students found that their files were incompatible with the system available in the lecture and no backup was provided as an alternative. Students were advised to be aware of the systems they planned to use or carry their own laptops. There is also lack of appropriate training in both the programme and the technology. This is a significant problem for the group of students involved in this study.

Conclusion

This study was administered to gauge student reaction to the PowerPoint presentation. It was found that PowerPoint has not truly helped facilitate presentation skills since most of skills required were lost during students’ use of PowerPoint in their speech delivery. Therefore, in

(Alster, 2002) words, "by investing too much faith that the software itself will transform a routine lesson into a lively, even memorable session", teachers and indeed, presenters abdicate their own responsibilities. The students' presenters in this study who projected PowerPoint slides on a screen and then simply read the contents of each slide, one after another, until the presentation is finished represented the unfounded faith in PowerPoint. Implicit in such behavior is the assumption that speech presentation is simply the delivery of content and that PowerPoint delivers content in a format that naturally attracts audiences' attention. But, as Garmston (2000) argued, "the audience interaction with the content—if learning is the goal—is always more important than the content itself" (p.76). The negative aspects identified above are easily avoided through adequate training of students in proper preparation and use of PowerPoint.

Should we always use PP as if it is another gospel truth in speech presentation? My answer is yes, but **no**. Therefore, familiarization with the technology provides a whole range of presentation options (Maier *et al*, 1998; Williams, 2004) that can be incorporated in the course to facilitate presentation by those with different styles. It should, if integrated and used properly, encourage and support more professional delivery of speech and thus facilitate student presentation. Technology should not be an add-on or an imposition but rather a means for achieving the goals of the course. Consequently, as Garmston (2000:77) cautioned, PowerPoint "must be used flexibly and sparingly to provide audience interaction with its content" just like writing on a flip chart, blackboard, printed handouts, videos or films, or any other presentation tool.

Perhaps the most significant potential negative effect, especially where 'complete' presentations are made available to audience, is the danger of encouraging audience to sit passively through the session. Here the potential improvements in structure and clarity, especially when appropriate graphics are used, are very significant positives although there are dangers too, such as PowerPoint is much more powerful and flexible than that and alternative activities can be facilitated by its use, limited only by the creativity of the user. PowerPoint should be used to provide a transparently structured presentation but not including too much detail.

Finally, this study has supported the findings of other researchers on PowerPoint use especially in classroom teaching in higher education (Alster, 2002; Holmes, 2004; Cyphert, 2004; Worley & Dyrud 2004 a, b). It is a pointer to the fact that is users should be enslaved to this dynamic technology, as it may work well for other topics and may not be good for yet another.

The Way forward

The following recommendations are made to improve speech presentation courses in Higher Education:

- Students should be formally trained on the use of PowerPoint for presentations. I will suggest that in the case of the University of Botswana, the use of this software should constitute topics to be dealt with in a Computer awareness course and should be made compulsory for all students.
- Students should be made aware of the objectives of using presentation aids, which include among others: to help them understand what types of presentation aids work best in what

situations; to teach them how to use presentation aids; and to help them learn to plan, design, and prepare presentation aids.

- The use of presentation aids should be taught through a combination of lecture and demonstration.
- Lecturers should collect presentation aids that are both very effective and very poor, using the latter for discussions of how they could be improved. They should prove useful for demonstrating why pastel colours are not suited for lettering and why students shouldn't cram too much on one presentation aid (Osborn & Osborn: 2005).
- In addition to teaching the various types of aids, their appropriate uses, and how to construct them, lecturers should impress upon their students how they should be used to illustrate and emphasize their most important ideas and information.
- Students should be made aware that PowerPoint is a tool with its strengths and weaknesses just like any other tools they use for making presentations.
- Lecturers should not make PowerPoint use compulsory in all presentations, as some topics are more amenable to other aids than the use of PowerPoint.

It is hoped that if these suggestions are taken into consideration by students and academic staff, PowerPoint use in speech presentations will be improved.

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APPENDIX A

Students' responses to the use of PowerPoint in oral presentation

	Questionnaire	Yes	%	No	%
1.	Have you received any training in p/point use?	23	23%	77	77%
2.	Do you feel the need for PowerPoint training?	95	95	5	5
3.	Do you think P/point made the topics organized?	87	87	13	13
4.	Do you find P/point presentations interesting?	73	73	27	27
5.	Do P/point support content of presentations?	84	84	16	16
6.	Do P/point made audience focus on presentations?	92	92	8	8
7.	Did P/point enhance presenter-audience interaction?	26	26	74	74
8.	Did P/point enhance audience participation?	81	81	9	9
9.	Did P/point arouse your attention?	65	65	35	35
10.	Did P/point promote the dynamics presentations?	15	15	85	85

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