SpeakEasy: online support for oral presentation skills

Monica Hill and Anne Storey

This paper describes the development of an online course that aims to help tertiary students improve their English oral presentation skills. There is frequently too little class time available for students to try to put into practice the skills deemed necessary for an effective presentation. This course aims to allow learners to prepare their presentations out of class and then practise these skills in class with peer and teacher feedback.

The challenge was to develop a web site that is interactive as well as informative, and which shows students the relevance of oral presentation skills in English in academic and professional contexts. The site also provides online tasks to encourage critical thinking, and gives feedback on answers. It aims to convince students of the transferability of presentation skills. Checklists and quizzes give students the opportunity to monitor their progress. Evaluation of the course has come from student questionnaires and teachers' views.

Introduction

As Asia generally, and Hong Kong in particular, becomes less dependent on manufacturing, and more service oriented, the need of students for good spoken English skills has become more acute. At the same time, media reports frequently highlight employers' complaints that graduates' oral skills leave considerable room for improvement. Students thus need to develop appropriate forms of professional discourse if they are to be successful in their careers.

Courses in improving oral presentation skills have formed part of the English language provision for students at the University of Hong Kong for several years. However, a new emphasis on oral competence in the workplace led the authors to the view that previous courses lacked adequate grounding in what skills were actually considered to be necessary, or even essential, by users, that is, people in professional positions for whom the making of presentations in English was an integral part of their work. The information gained from interviews with a variety of professionals was to form the basis of the new course.

An additional factor that reinforced the need for an updated course on oral presentation skills was a university-wide curriculum renewal in which teachers were faced with streamlining courses that now had to be shorter and more focused. Students had given consistently positive evaluations over several years to the oral component of the old EAP

courses, that is, academic oral presentation skills in English. They reported that the opportunities to practise and present were useful and relevant, and that feedback from instructors and peers was valuable. The authors thus concluded that there remained a need for continuing emphasis on practice of oral presentation skills in English and individual feedback, but that they were up against a shortage of classroom time.

A third consideration was the trend for IT integration into courses at the University of Hong Kong. Cummins (2000) describes the power of information technology as developing 'students' academic language and critical literacy', and similarly sees IT in academic language learning as a way of providing focus on meaning, language, and use, to help learners access 'people resources' and 'information resources' relevant to extending and deepening their knowledge of academic language.

The authors' intention, therefore, was to develop course materials that would focus on both academic and professional contexts for oral presentations in English, and secondly, through the use of web technology, free up class time to allow more opportunities for students to practise in front of an audience and receive feedback from their peers, as well as teachers. The *SpeakEasy* web materials would provide both 'people' and 'information resources' in the form of advice from Hong Kong professionals and academics who use presentation skills on a daily basis in their work. The third aim was to develop a semi-independent learning package which students could go back to later in their academic life , when called on to give presentations in seminars and tutorials, or prior to job interviews and their subsequent careers.

This paper will first examine some techniques used to teach oral presentation skills, describe the professional support we received from the external community, and explain the methodology behind the new course. We will outline the *SpeakEasy* course materials, and present the student and teacher evaluations. Lastly, we will explain how the course has been further developed to take this feedback into account.

Current techniques Many books that deal with oral presentation skills are geared towards native English speakers. Public speaking manuals provided some basic guidelines, but we felt we needed to focus more on the problems facing Hong Kong students. Mueller (2000) describes the needs of students from a similar background—much of their education has been in Cantonese, which is also the language normally used outside the classroom. For many of them, exposure to English has been relatively limited, as a result of which they feel uncomfortable when speaking English in front of their peers. Then, as Mueller also notes, when students enter the professional world, employers are highly critical of their communicative competence.

Effective presentations, in which speakers appear comfortable and at ease, are usually based on careful, thorough, preparation. In her work on technical communication, Gurak (2000) emphasizes that an awareness of the audience's background—their needs and wants—and clarity of purpose, are crucial elements for consideration in the planning process. Andeweg *et al.* (1998) further develop this idea by noting the importance

of attracting and holding the audience's attention as a key feature of the introduction: the presence of an anecdote at the beginning is more likely to raise the audience's interest. The use of video examples for evaluative and instructional purposes was also taken into consideration. In Boyle's (1996) study, second language learners were taught to make their presentations more cohesive, and to assess their cohesiveness with the help of video recordings. We also wanted to highlight the effectiveness of self-assessment of performance (Hendrix 2000) as a feature of evaluating students' own video recordings of rehearsed presentations.

Morita (2000) emphasizes the importance of learning through participatory activities, including watching other students' performance where they, the students, are the 'experts'. She goes on to say that an academic oral presentation involves 'not only content knowledge and cognitive skills, but also cultural knowledge of and skill in expressing epistemic stance, engaging others, and collaboratively constructing knowledge'. (p. 294) In designing the course, the consensus of professionals and course designers on what makes an effective oral presentation was broken down into organization of content, awareness of audience, practice, and delivery. The content of students' presentations was to come from background reading before embarking on a small-scale research study. The data thus gathered were used as the basis of written reports and of their presentations to the audience—the rest of the class and the instructor. In this way the student presenters became the 'experts' who aimed to display their content knowledge competently, and interacted collaboratively with their group members, their audience, and their instructor.

Starting out

Students frequently report that a good command of English is all that is required to make a good presentation. On the rare occasion when there is a native English speaker in the class, they can see that language proficiency is not the sole requirement, and that preparation, organization, body language, and visual aids are equally, if not more important. This point is stressed in Morita's study (2000), which found that the native vs. non-native speaker distinction on its own did not influence the success or failure of a presentation, and that non-native speakers often succeeded through employing a greater range of strategies in preparation of their presentations. This was reinforced by the interviews with academic and professional speakers who were well respected by their peers, and recommended to us as good examples of captivating speakers. We were fortunate to be able to secure the co-operation of a lawyer from an international law firm, a banker, an entrepreneur, and a civil service trainer, as well as academic speakers. Most importantly, however, we also wanted the co-operation of students to act as student role models.

Technical staff video recorded the interviews and examples of presentations, and then edited and digitized the clips we needed to put on the Internet. A teaching development grant awarded through the Computer Centre of the University enabled us to have help and advice from web designers on campus.

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Challenges

Given this support, our aim was to create a web site which students could access on or off campus with video examples of skilled presenters in action, and which they could preview *before* class to allow themselves more time in class for their own practice presentations. It was our intention to make the learning experience an interactive one, with evaluative tasks and feedback—*not* just a scheme to upload written materials onto the Internet.

The online course also aimed to encourage improvement in the areas of critical thinking and analytical skills through interactive tasks in which participants are required to give feedback on student performance, organize ideas into a coherent form, and evaluate a selection of visual aids in order to identify the successful components. It also aimed to convince students, through the use of professional presenters, that oral presentation skills are not simply an assignment for the English course, but an integral part of academic and professional life—a skill which can be transferred from 'gown' to 'town'.

Design of the course web site

The course is designed so that students can work through typical steps in the preparation of an oral presentation, and, if students want to find out more about a particular aspect of presentations, they can dip into the site at that point by clicking on the relevant icon. Figure 1, for instance, shows the site information page, which presents an outline of the course to the user.

Introduction to the course

Following this course either in class with a teacher or on-line will help you to make more effective oral presentations. As university students, you often have to make oral presentations in English during your studies, both in your English classes and in your other subjects. The skills learned at university can also be applied later in your career.

The course will cover

- The importance of oral presentation skills
- Planning your presentation
- Organising the content
- Using visual aids
- Delivery: language, voice and body language
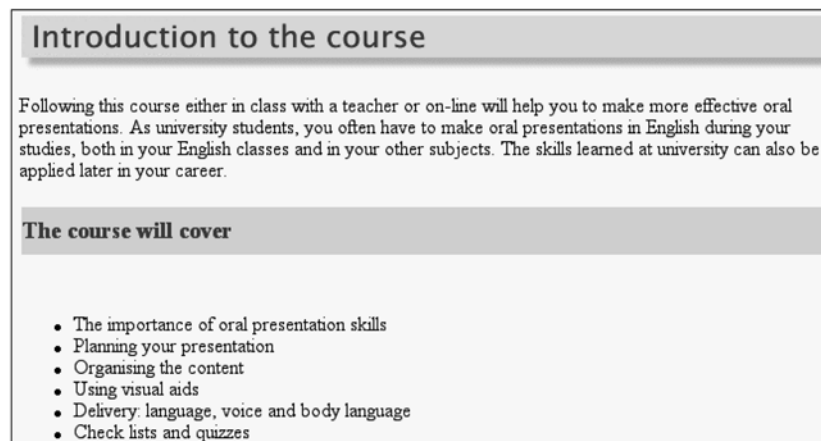- Check lists and quizzes

FIGURE 1
Information page

Students are also introduced to their individual homepages within the site, where they can keep a record of their progress, their answers, and, ideally, a digitized video recording of one of their presentations. These homepages can also be used to share ideas, have feedback, and display transcripts.

First steps

The content is divided into an introduction to the importance of oral presentation skills, followed by planning a presentation, organization of the content, visual aids, then the delivery and assessment. Each section contains short video clips of professionals talking about presenting in front of an audience or students who are also making presentations, advice on steps to follow, and interactive tasks with feedback (Figure 2).

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How important are presentation skills?

Listen to the advice of professional people in Hong Kong and
Kong regarding the importance of presentation skills.

The Hon Antony Leung, JP	Financial Secretary, HK SAR, H
Susan Leung	Senior Training Officer, Civil Se
Andy See	Lawyer, Clifford Chance, Intern
Dr Shen Shir Ming	Deputy Director, SPACE and fo Sciences, University of Hong K
David Tang, O.B.E.	Founder and Chairman of the C (CELL); Chairman of the China Stores
Margaret Yao	Vice President and Regional M Philippines, Chase Treasury So Hong Kong

RealPlayer: mgt1

150.1 Kbps   00:00.0/00:00.0

FIGURE 2
Professional speakers—
Margaret Yao, banker

In their introductions, the professional speakers talk about the
importance, in their various fields, of having presentation skills in
English, so that students can listen and note their ideas on their
homepages. Advice includes the importance of knowing the topic well,
selecting the information that the audience will want to know, and
rehearsing the presentation using vocal variety and effective body
language. In the section on planning, students learn about the need to
have a clear objective and awareness of the audience. One of the first
tasks stresses the importance of timing, and provides jumbled outlines of
talks on topics related to Asian values for students to reorganize into a
coherent framework, and then present them in class in one-minute
presentations. To maximize class time for presentation practice, students
can work through the tasks at home.

Moving on

In class, each session builds up the length of the practice presentation. In
the second session students will have chosen their own topic and
sketched out a structure. They then focus on the introduction to their
talk, compare examples of video-recorded introductions, and practise
language that will be useful at this particular stage. They learn about
highlighting their key points, the need to guide the audience through a
talk by the use of transition phrases, the use of anecdotes, examples, and
evidence, as well as ideas for how to draw the talk to a close before
handling questions. They can then practise the introduction and
conclusion of their own talks in class, and take questions from their
classmates.

The section on visual aids focuses on the use of overhead transparencies
and PowerPoint slides. While students are usually keen to learn to use
the software, they are often not aware of the problems it may present.
They frequently crowd their visual aids with too much information, in
using fonts that are too small, and all the decorative, animated, and audio
features that are available. To help students avoid these pitfalls, by
clicking on the appropriate icon they can complete a task to evaluate a
range of examples of transparencies and slides. They then practise
part of their presentation, using a slide or a transparency to support their
point.

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The penultimate section on delivery aims to help students with language in terms of clarity and conciseness, pronunciation, stress, intonation, and body language. We have found that students are nervous about speaking without a script, and need encouragement to use cue cards so that their voices are not affected by the monotonous tone that almost inevitably accompanies reading aloud. At this stage the stress is on rehearsal and knowledge of the topic (not memorization of a script). Tasks in this section include critiquing video clips, and through these students can assess the importance of eye contact, gestures, facial expression, and movement, as shown in Figure 3.
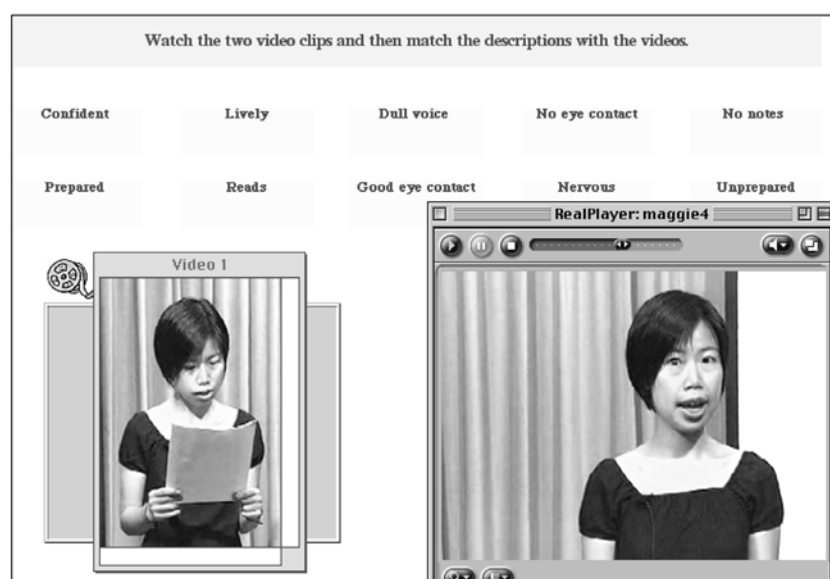
Final preparation

FIGURE 3
Example of an evaluative
task

Before making a full presentation in class, the assessment section provides a checklist to remind students of what they should have prepared. They can also watch video clips showing good examples of student presentations, and finally take a short quiz to see what they have learnt about oral presentation skills. An assessment sheet is also included to indicate what peers and teachers will be looking for when students make their own presentation.

Evaluation

As mentioned above, the course has been used extensively as part of regular English enhancement courses, and also as a short intensive oral skills course. Students have completed pre- and post-quizzes and questionnaires. Teachers' views were also sought, and the feedback from students and teachers has generally been positive. There were, however, technical problems with logging in to the site, and with the student home pages; the video clips, for example, took a relatively long time to download if the site was accessed off campus. The course designers also felt that there was still too much text. In order to solve the technical problems it was decided to produce a CD-ROM, which would mean better quality video with instant access, and we were fortunate that the University Press showed an interest in the materials.

In editing the revised version for transfer to CD-ROM, the file size was reduced, and more examples of student presentations were included. More tasks with feedback were also added, along with transcripts of the advice given in the video clips, so that students could check their comprehension after listening. In response to a request from teachers, all the video clips were compiled onto videocassettes, so that teachers could show these separately in class if they wished.

One feature of the software used to create the site was that it could log student movements through the site: these data indicated that not all students were using the site, and that some would come to class ill-prepared for the practice sessions that were planned. This is an issue that remains unresolved, but is perhaps a frequent finding. It would be possible to incorporate a grade for online course participation, which would be related to the amount of activity in the web site, but at this stage we prefer to use encouragement rather than threats. Overall, we have felt that—through the use of an online course—we have been able to maximize the use of classroom time for practice and feedback to students on their presentation skills. It facilitates preparation outside class, but it is not intended as a completely self-learning package. In fact it has proved a worthwhile resource for our students to prepare their presentations at home during suspension of classes caused by the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong. There is, however, no substitute for the real thing: a live audience, and encouraging, helpful, teacher feedback.

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Note

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