Research Article

Adopting Industry Practices in Delivering Professional Presentations: Considerations in Teaching Presentation Skills in University

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Abstract

In an effort to increase graduate employability and minimize university-industry mismatch, concerted efforts have been taken by the Malaysian government to encourage collaboration between universities and the industry. Such linkages have led to a more informed curriculum review process, especially for language and communication courses. This research examines the current practices of industries in delivering quality professional presentations to be incorporated into the teaching and learning of presentation skills at higher education level. Ten industry representatives consisting of managers, heads of departments, and directors from established telecommunications, agriculture, medicine, property, financial services, and investment corporations in Malaysia were interviewed. The results show that storylining and incorporating infographics using minimal slides are among the best practices in current corporate presentations. Additionally, the ability to deliver a clear purpose statement and curating the delivery to suit the perspective of the audience were also considered as fundamental to deliver effective presentations. Thus, the practices identified in this research are crucial to be incorporated into current presentation courses in university to enhance students' presentation skills and develop their ability to do well in delivering pitches and performing in interviews, especially to increase their employability and ensure the courses are relevant to current industry needs.

Index Terms: presentation skills, oral presentations, industry practices, higher education, communication course

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of professional skills have become a pressing concern among all industry fields, as highlighted by numerous studies that have been conducted in the past that seek to identify the most crucial transferable skills that are relevant to current globalization trends [1]-[3]. From these studies, one of the most crucial soft skills cited is communication skills, especially on the verbal component such as presentation skills, highlighting the high need for universities to produce graduates who can converse and present themselves well when they venture into the workforce [3].

The ability to deliver effective presentations is considered as a core competency for higher-educated professionals [4]. Nowadays, many workplaces have been transformed to become cross-functional in nature, requiring staff who are generally "communicators" (such as those doing sales, marketing, and public relations) to have a particular level of technical knowledge. On the flipside, it is also expected now for technical staff (such as engineers, programmers and designers) to have the relevant soft skills to be able to communicate well with others [5]. This cross of different functions has shed light on the high value placed on those who are able to present well in communicating with others.

Numerous studies have been done, both in the past and recently, on the best methods that universities can

adopt to develop presentation skills in students [6]-[11]. For instance, [6] conducted a study on the student-centered approach to develop effective communication skills, where students work in small teams and are facilitated by the instructor to elaborate on topics related to soft skills and develop simple online materials for all participants. The goal was to increase students' active listening, teamwork, and conflict management skills along others. Another study conducted by [7] examined the potential of utilizing computer-mediated feedback within a virtual reality environment to facilitate the development of students' presentation skills, as it draws the concern of students requiring feedback, whether immediate or delayed, to improve their presentation skills. In fact, much research has been especially dedicated to studying the role of feedback in improving oral presentation skills [8]-[10]. However, there has been little elaboration on what actual subskills are required to fully develop an effective professional presentation, as researchers in the field of management seemed to pay little attention to this area despite its importance [11].

According to [12], there are important considerations behind delivering an effective presentation. Among the subskills required include being attuned to personal appearance, delivering using concise and direct messages, and ensuring messages are tailor-made to the right audience. Another conceptual framework for effective public speaking was developed by [11], where the antecedents of effective public speaking are the speakers' scientific skills (including critical research skills, technical knowledge and experience) and the speaker's artistic skills (including creativity, improvisation skills, speech rhythm and listening skills). In this framework, therefore, the two main skills are what [11] calls the scientific and artistic skills.

In the context of higher education, [13] developed a validated rubric to test oral presentation performance, where the initial rubric was developed through a systematic review from 52 past research publications on oral presentations. The validity of the formulated rubric was then tested by an expert group of higher educational professionals (n=38). From the literature, four main criteria were identified in past assessment instruments to develop oral presentation competence, which are (1) the content of the presentation, (2) the structure of the presentation, (3) the interaction with the audience, and (4) the presentation delivery (such as use of eye contact, body language, and voice control). However, the broadness of each category still leaves much to be desired, which is a sentiment that has also been voiced by [14], who posited that there is no comprehensive list of presentation skills, and that a major problem of most existing rubrics and descriptors are in its over-generalizations.

Following the discussion above, the aim of this paper is to identify the most crucial factors that constitute effective professional presentation, through a discovery of the skills and subskills required, as practiced by the industry. To achieve this, industry practitioners were interviewed to obtain their thoughts and insights to the best practices in delivering effective professional presentations. Specifically, the objectives of the research are as follows:

RO1: To determine the factors that constitute an effective professional presentation as practiced in the industry.

RO2: To identify the common and most important subskills required to deliver an effective professional presentation.

Based on the formulated research objectives, the following research questions were formulated for this study:

RQ1: What factors constitute an effective professional presentation as practiced in the industry?

RQ2: What are the common and most important subskills required to deliver an effective professional presentation?

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: firstly, the following section explains the methodology of the study that was conducted, especially the research design adopted, the research participants, and the data collection and analysis process that was employed for this study. The next section discusses the findings using quotes from the interview sessions as a means to answer the research questions. The findings, limitations of the research, recommendations for future research and conclusion of the study is then elaborated in the fourth section of this paper.

2. Methodology

A. Research Design

To answer the research questions, the basic interpretive qualitative design [15] was adopted as the research design for this research. This research sits within the interpretivist paradigm of qualitative research, which concerns areas of study in which there is an absence of an absolute "truth" [16]. Thus, this research was not

conducted to uncover an absolute "truth", but rather to obtain information and knowledge that may be useful within a certain level, especially with regards to the practice of designing and delivering an effective presentation skills course in university.

B. Research Participants

This research seeks to uncover the most common and important presentation subskills across different industries. In order to obtain the most common skills required across various industries, maximum variation sampling was adopted, where the companies were chosen from three main industry clusters: science and technology, business, and social sciences and humanities. Not only that, maximum variation sampling was also employed where the researcher tried to diversify the portfolios of the participants interviewed. Purposive sampling was utilized to identify the research participants. The selection criteria set, based on similar past literature, was managers (preferably in the senior position or who is a head of department) who has worked closely with fresh graduates in the company.

As a result, ten industry representatives consisting of managers, heads of departments, and directors from established telecommunications, agriculture, medicine, property, financial services, and investment corporations in Malaysia were identified to participate in this research. The industry representatives also came from different portfolios, which were human resource, finance, sales, audit, quality, strategy, operations, and project management. Table 1 below shows the breakdown of the participants' details.

Table 1 Study Participants

Code	Position	Portfolio	Industry
IN1	Manager	Human Resource	Medicine
IN2	Manager	Finance Network	Telecommunications
IN3	Manager	Sales	Telecommunications
IN4	Manager	Audit	Telecommunications
IN5	Senior Executive	Quality	Agriculture
IN6	Department Head	Pharmacy	Medicine
IN7	Deputy General Manager	Strategy & Corporate	Property
IN8	Manager	Internal Audit	Finance
IN9	State Director	-	Finance
IN10	Department Head	Legal, Compliance and Risk	Investment holding

C. Data Collection and Analysis

To answer the research questions, a full qualitative approach was used where data was collected via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the research participants. An interview protocol was first developed through an adaptation of questions from past studies such as from [3], which was then subject to an ethical review to ensure the suitability of the questions for the purpose of the research. Ethics approval was then granted at the university level to conduct the interviews.

Once identified, the industry representatives were contacted directly to schedule the interviews, and data collection commenced between December 2020 to February 2021. Due to concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were given the opportunity to choose whether they preferred having the interviews face-to-face or online via Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. On January 13th 2021, a strict movement control order was implemented in the country, prohibiting inter-state and inter-district travel as well as any social gatherings. Thus, only three face-to-face interviews were conducted, while the rest (out of necessity or preference) were conducted online.

The interviews were conducted for an hour to an hour and a half. A voice recorded was used for face-to-face interviews, while the recording function on Google Meet or Microsoft Teams was used for the online interviews. Following each interview, the recording was transcribed personally by the researcher, and the transcription was then shared with the interviewees for checking. The participants were also given the opportunity to further elaborate on points of interest, and questions were also asked to clarify points where

needed. From this a final transcript was produced for the research.

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was conducted. Codes were assigned to relevant quotes and input from the transcript, and a codebook was used to keep track of the open codes in the process of analyzing the transcripts. From the open codes, common themes were identified, which in this research may be classified into three broad categories: clear content, clear structure, and effective use of visual aids. The following section uses this breakdown to explain the findings.

It should be noted that the skills mentioned were not intended to be accepted as a "need" or a "must" for fresh graduates to have when entering the workplace. Rather, the data reflects what most of the participants communicated as the skills that are within the best practices and ideals that many fresh graduates and universities should strive towards when developing courses to build skills in delivering professional presentations.

3. Findings

From the thematic analysis conducted, three main categories were identified, which are (1) clear content, (2) clear structure, and (3) use of visual aids. The subsequent sections discuss the three categories as is supported by the quotes that were extracted from the interview transcripts regarding the subject.

A. Clear Content

With regards to content, interestingly, there is a common expectation among industry representatives for presentations to have content that is simple and supported by appropriate data and facts, which is prefaced by having a clear understanding of the objective of the presentation and the audience who will be listening to the presentation. In many corporate presentations, there is often an abundance of important information, however, there exists the need to sift for "key information" that needs to be shared based on a clear objective of delivering the presentation in the first place.

"You have tons of information, but what are the key information that you want to put to capture their attention?" (IN4)

"Usually, what we do is that the focus is on key messages in the presentations because the time to present is for deliberations and discussions." (IN7)

"(You cannot just) say whatever comes across in your mind, without knowing whether it's right or not." (IN6)

A few of the participants mentioned that having a clear objective is the most important aspect of delivering an effective presentation, as this will then guide the presenter to what approach is best suited to meet that objective.

"When we talk about short presentations like this, it must be accurate. Accurate." (IN3)

"You have to be very clear about the objective. The objective must be crystal. When you have a very clear objective, you will see very clearly how to approach, how to execute, and how to answer that objective." (IN4)

There is a common purpose behind isolating the most crucial key information and ensuring that the objective is crystal clear, which is to deliver a simple and impactful presentation. Most of the respondents cited simplicity as one of the highest goals behind every presentation, which refers to a shorter presentation, less information, but clearer objective and impact.

"You have tons of information, but what are the key information that you want to put that capture their attention? You need to highlight the, you know, the details from the data, what you have already concluded." (IN4)

"If we are not clear of our key message which is bounded by the lead line, we will end up putting everything." (IN7)

"One thing, reports to corporate world, they're very straight to the point. It doesn't matter if it's a written report or PowerPoint, Excel, it must come to the point where it doesn't drag." (IN3)

Regarding the reason why simplified presentations are so valuable, the participants answered that consideration of the audience plays a crucial role.

"The ultimate audience that we have is CEO, senior management, and board members. Their time is very

precious." (IN8)

"At the end of the day, you will need to know your stakeholders. Who are you presenting to? Certain stakeholders, we know, 'Oh this person will ask these, this will ask this' [to be prepared]." (IN7)

"Because you actually have to put yourself in management's shoes, in board's shoes, what is actually at the back of their minds? What would be their concern?" (IN4)

"It's about understanding who your clients are. Because every leader in our multiple companies, every leader possess different personalities. Different appetites. So it's a learning curve for them to understand this particular business leader will appreciate very lengthy presentations and some would really just, I wanna hear what I want to hear. And few others are the kind that, yes, let's go straight to the point." (IN10)

Thus, from the insights shared above, it is clear that in terms of content, clarity and simplicity are among the best practices adopted by industries in delivering effective presentations. Even though corporate meetings are often long, based on the data collected, there seemed to be a general understanding for the need to be able to deliver in as short as ten minutes if needed. There is also a need to be able to identify key information that holds the highest impact in meeting the objective of the presentation, which suggests the importance of critical thinking and clear structuring when organizing the contents of the presentation.

B. Clear Structure

In terms of the structure of the presentations, one interesting finding is the proposal for the use of storylining as a method to structure effective presentations. This skill seemed to comprise of other subskills, which is the appropriate and strategic use of relevant facts to build the case, followed by adopting an effective structuring method to clearly define what action is required from the audience.

"They present their presentations to top management, so it's called storylining, storyboarding. [...] The way I would do it is that in the presentation slides, we have the slide, and then we have a lead line. So my lead line is the key message. And that lead line, if I read only that lead line of my slides, it would provide a story that I want to share with the stakeholder. And that story will be supported by any data analysis that I have, any information that I want to put in." (IN7)

"The way we communicate, we need to tell exactly, what is the should-be. On this should be, what are the gaps? From the gaps, what are the root causes? If it happens, why it happens? And then you have the impact, then you have the recommendations. So how best to communicate this, but simplified?" (IN4)

"That means we go straight to the point. What is the issue, what caused the issue, what is the impact of the issue, what is our recommendation." (IN8)

Apart from having a clear structure through storylining, another important thing to consider is the strategic use of data and facts to back the claims made during the presentation. While this point has been raised in the previous section on clear content, several participants seemed to make a distinction that knowing how to share data within a strategic, storylining structure of the presentation.

"How they present their cases or facts la. That means, based on the facts that they have, how they want to persuade or convince the audience to accept or to at least explore the possibility of rather this thing should be studied further, things like that." (IN8)

Thus, from the insights shared by the participants, it is interesting to observe that a number of them shared a similar storyline to how they would structure their presentations. The common structure is to start with issue, followed by the impact or implications, and end with the recommendations, demonstrating the simplicity that is emphasized by the participants, even though they come from different fields and roles. Another interesting finding is the use of the "lead line", which is one line used in every slide to move the "story" forward and explain exactly what the rest of the slides intend to convey.

C. Use of Visual Aids

In terms of the use of visual aids, there is a consensus that slides are now designed with more infographics than text. There is also the need to use less slides in the main presentation, where any other supplementary information is moved to the appendix. Also, interestingly, many more of the participants also mention that the slide deck functions as the report to their management, and that they are not required to provide a second, more detailed document as the 'report'.

"Right now we use a lot of graphics. Like if you look at the COVID-19 infographics. Everything now is digital." (IN9)

"We are actually entering the phase of, things are more visualized, things are more into infographics." (IN10)

"For the new set of resources coming in, maybe the value that they can actually bring in, in the sense that, maybe they can wow us, you know, just by giving a problem-solving overview in one single slide." (IN4)

"It shouldn't be lengthy, it should be less than ten slides, ideally five slides. Imagine, five slides for a presentation for your Chief Technology Officer." (IN3)

The use of concise slides where information is conveyed using infographics supports the previous two sections where effective presentations are valued for their conciseness and quality key information.

D. Framework of Professional Presentation Skills

From the findings of the thematic analysis as discussed in the sections above, a simple framework was drawn that reflects the skills and subskills that were discovered, as depicted in the figure below.
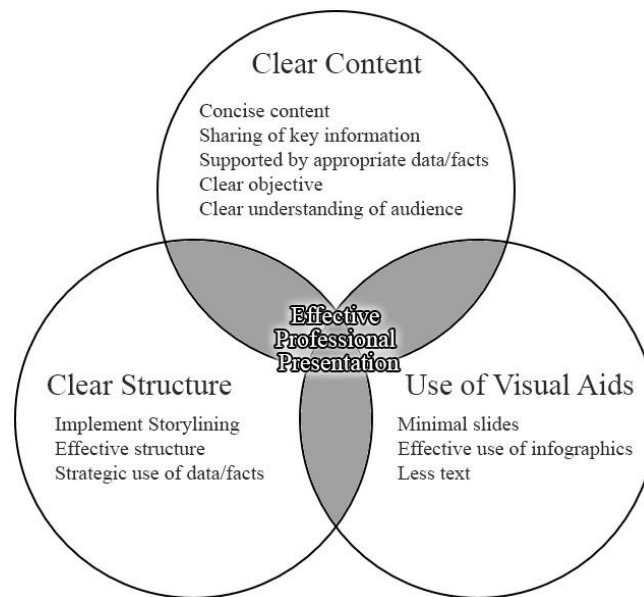

Figure 1: Effective Professional Presentations

4. Discussion and Conclusion

To reiterate, the aim of this study was to identify the most crucial factors that constitute effective professional presentation, through a discovery of the skills and subskills required, as practiced by the industry. The results from the open codes from the thematic analysis of the data revealed three broad factors that constitute an effective professional presentation: clear content, clear delivery, and effective use of visual aids. Interestingly, these three categories seemed to be in line with the four broad criteria defined by [13], with the exception of presentation delivery.

In terms of the subskills found, some of the notable subskills to deliver an effective professional presentation include identifying key information to be conveyed, having a clear understanding of the objective of the presentation, understanding the needs of the audience, making strategic use of appropriate data and facts, being able to deliver presentations in a concise and impactful manner, simplifying information, structuring the presentation effectively, and making effective use of visual aids, especially in using less slides and more infographics. These subskills may form the ground for further research to better identify the individual subskills that can truly contribute towards delivering more effective professional presentations.

The finding of this study does not cover all aspects required to deliver an effective professional presentation. For instance, one interesting note that should be made is that there was no mentioning of the paralinguistic requirements of delivery (such as voice projection, eye contact, body language, tone, etc.) by the participants in delivering an effective oral presentation. This differs from the study conducted by [11], [13], and [14], which place importance on paralinguistic capabilities such as voice control, eye contact, confidence, and body language among others. The researchers' view on this absence is not to say that the delivery skills are unimportant, but that it may be a known prerequisite to deliver a presentation in the first place.

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In light of that, in the context of higher education, it should be noted that the participants did not particularly convey that these subskills are a "need" or a "must" for fresh graduates. Rather, the skills conveyed are ideals for fresh graduates to have, and there is a common understanding that when the fresh graduates enter the workplace, they will be involved in the process (such as to collect information and design the pitch deck) of preparing for the presentation but may not necessarily need to deliver the presentation themselves. However, there is no denying the link between academia and the industry, where there is a clear expectation for university to prepare students to meet industry needs [17]. Thus, the findings from this study may serve as a starting point towards developing a more comprehensive framework to further enhance graduates' professional presentation skills in university.

Following this, one of the major contributions of this study is therefore how the skills required for a good presentation and what the participants view are ideal for an effective professional presentation in the workplace setting have been differentiated. As [14] mentioned, numerous studies on professional presentations done in the past have yet to truly examine the finer details of the exact subskills required to deliver more effective presentations. This study thus contributes also to close this gap via a qualitative approach to attain insights on what subskills are most valued in the industry.

This study is not without its limitations. Firstly, due to COVID-19, most of the interviews needed to be held online, and there was no way to ask the industry representatives to allow the researchers to observe an actual meeting where a professional presentation could take place. Due to constraints in resources, only the qualitative method was viable for this study to maximize the number of interview participants. As an extension to that, the findings of this study cannot therefore be generalized to represent all industry practitioners and industries.

This study can be expanded further in several ways. Firstly, it is recommended for a future study to triangulate this finding and further strengthen the data using a quantitative approach. An instrument can be designed using the skills identified from this study with other professional presentation skills and subskills from past research, which can then be validated to see which subskills in particular are given more emphasis over others. Secondly, the perspectives of this study came from only one stakeholder, which are industry representatives. A future study can therefore collect relevant data from other stakeholders such as students, alumni and academics to obtain a wider perspective of the situation.

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