Teaching presentation skills to undergraduate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students: The

need for authenticity, scaffolding and humour.

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I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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Introduction

The increasing use of assessed oral presentations at university is likely to continue as a safeguard against inappropriate Generative AI use (Eachempati et al., 2025). Unfortunately, while it is easy to predict when students with the poorest communication skills will lack confidence, I have also witnessed fluent students 'bomb' in front of a class under the demands of public speaking even when they have otherwise displayed confident and fluent oral English skills in class. Due to student anxiety (Mumford, 2018) and poor presentation strategies many students are underperforming, so EAP tutors must share effective techniques. This reflection outlines causes of poor presentation skills in Hong Kong, focusing on lessons learned, and ends with recommendations and a short series of self-developed videos that colleagues could use with their own university students.

Why students deliver ineffective presentations

Ineffective presentation skills in East Asian universities often stem from a local education system that often tolerates memorized, robotic recitation (Bankowski, 2010; Hamp-Lyons, 1998). Even when asked to prepare natural, interactive presentations, students often exhibit fossilized habits such as over-reliance on notes and a lack of eye contact.

A lack of truly authentic academic presentation skills resources

While one or two good academic English presentation skills textbooks are starting to appear on the market, there remains a lack of truly authentic resources (Zereva, 2024). Early in my career, lacking suitable EAP textbooks, I mistakenly overused business-oriented presentation materials and entrepreneurial TedTalks. On reflection, I see that these approaches made the presentation task appear even more threatening to anxious students. In terms of Vygotsky's social learning theories, such slick presentations were setting expectations far beyond the students' zone of proximal development. Zereva (2024) notes that many commercially available presentation guides also assume that audiences require a performative act and put overdue emphasis on vocal variety and

enunciation rather than authentic university criteria such as detailed support for ideas and the ability to defend claims.

Developing effectives strategies and more authentic resources

Mid-career, I therefore begun to ask students for consent to use their recorded assessments in future classes, leading to immediate improvements when students viewed peer examples. Watching the examples of the more authentic task requirements with my students, I could convince students that even their peers who looked nervous or had marked local pronunciation features could achieve good grades with sufficient preparation. The only limitation was that I also wanted to also show students '*what not to do'*, and the use of recordings of real-life students doing badly in presentations seemed less ethical.

The use of role-played short videos

Drawing on social learning theory, students need both positive role models and examples of negative coping strategies (e.g., reading from notes or PowerPoint slides). This makes students receptive to new strategies they could use to cope with the demands. The most effective solution that I have adopted in recent years is to find younger tutors around the same age as the students and record them 'role playing' presentations and modelling both ineffective and effective presentation strategies.

One lesson I learned the hard way mid-career was that self-developed videos are only ever as good as the microphone quality available. For the video series presented in this paper I was given a small budget to work with a professional cameraman who used discrete 'lapel microphones' on each performer. Another issue is whether to micro-direct the performers or to allow them more creative license. What I now find most effective is to meet with the performers to explain the course requirements and help them 'storyboard' typical effective and ineffective student behaviours before

leaving them alone with the cameraman. At the editing stage, I set strict limits of three-minutes per video to make the resources as engaging as possible.

The three-part video series produced in collaboration with young tutors at my department is now presented along with the videos' aims and practical staging tips for exploiting the resources in lessons. The basic premise of these three videos is that students must see the need for change to address their fossilised bad habits and coping strategies. The approach also allows parodic exaggeration that helps deliver the core message in a short video format. Furthermore, the humour that can be added to such parodies makes the materials more engaging.

[Video 1](#)

This video addresses the fossilised ineffective habits of delivery that include reading from notes, poor preparation, excessive text on slides, reading/speaking in monotone delivery without sufficient vocal variety in terms of sentence stress or pausing, poor eye-contact and a lack of engagement with the audience. At earlier stages in my career, I underestimated the difficulty in helping students to overcome these poor habits. Indeed, there were often unintended consequences when I asked them to give me a 'more natural style of delivery' or banned students

from reading from notes without offering them further training in effective preparation strategies. In reaction, instead of preparing effectively some students instead often chose the equally poor 'coping strategies', as displayed in this video. In addition to witnessing students put everything they wish to say in long sentences and paragraphs on their PowerPoint slides (and read from slides), I have seen students paste full scripts into minute font size on the back of 'cue cards' (which they then struggle to read), or even try to surreptitiously read scripts from smart phones hidden behind cue cards.

Before asking students to watch video 1 I often ask students to reflect on how they think excessive use of notes and reading from scripts will affect a) their voice (pitch/intonation/naturalness) and b) the audience perceptions of their preparedness and interest in a topic. Students are then asked to make notes on the audience reactions. As soon as possible after watching the video, I get students reflecting on their own habits in "how often do you look at the audience/look at your notes/read from PowerPoint slides" type questions in pair work.

Video 2

Video 2 addresses many problems connected with poor preparation such as attempting to deliver too much content in an excessively paced presentation, hesitation/use of filler, and poor
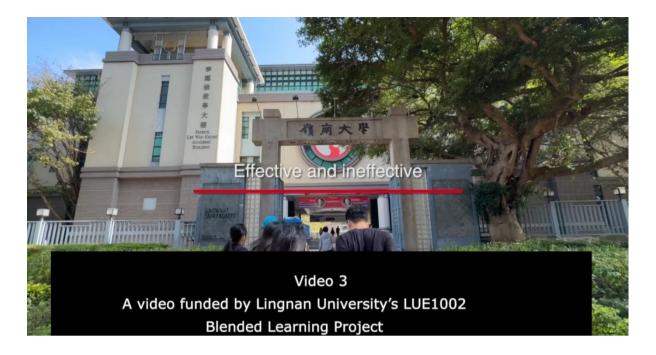
slide design. Video 2 is also useful for addressing 'difficult conversations' about shyness and hesitation. On the one hand, shyer students need to make a conscious effort to slow down and engage the audience with eye contact. Moreover, in my experience many students underestimate the amount of preparation, rehearsal and practice that an effective presentation requires. On the other hand, when discussing hesitation/filler it is easy to make students already self-conscious about their weaker oral English-speaking skills more anxious if it is not made clear that repair strategies and hesitation are a natural part of communication. This light-hearted video shows students the need for change without overdue emphasis on speaking ability.

Before watching the video, I therefore typically ask students to reflect on questions such as:

- Will you achieve a lower grade in your presentation if you are not 'fluent' (e.g. hesitate, use 'fillers' such as 'Er….'?

- Is it important to look at the audience?

- What will happen if you speak too quickly in the first minute of your presentation?

Following this sort of reflection, the tutor can frame conversations about hesitation and shyness around a more constructive learning point: preparation strategies.

Video 3

The purpose of video 3 is to model best practices in terms of body language, use of voice, the use of cue cards, the use of visuals, effective openers, effective conclusions and dealing with challenging audience questions.

Evaluation

After watching the three videos, it is extremely important to scaffold the best practices by helping students practice the skills in short presentations that promote interactive delivery. For example, after helping students design and produce effective cue cards, I typically ask them to deliver one-minute presentations in pairs with the 'observer' checking how many times they use their notes and asking questions about the short talks. The key is to reinforce how much an effective interactive presentation should resemble a natural (if well prepared) conversation they might have with a peer.

After using these latest videos on a course with 600 EAP students for three semesters, they have become a popular and integral part of our teaching materials. Feedback shows that students rank these videos as the most relevant and useful of all our multi-modal resources on the course. Meanwhile, tutors have noticed a greater calmness and preparedness among weaker students. The

focus groups showed that students saw the face-validity of insisting on greater eye-contact and reduced use of notes, agreeing that it helped them prepare for the likely demands of the presentations they might deliver in their future careers even if it required greater effort in the short term. Most pleasingly, more students in recent semesters have reported feeling greater confidence in their oral English skills after completing the course.

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