Building Confidence, Performative Habits, and Interdisciplinary Audience Awareness through Presentations in a Graduate-level Academic Oral Communication Course

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Abstract

This chapter presents a pedagogical model for a graduate academic oral communication course taught at a new Sino-American joint-venture university. The course implements a process-orientated approach involving three primary components to develop academic presentation skills: performative habit building, interdisciplinary audience awareness, and reflection. The course is built around five presentations that lead to a conference-style presentation open to the community. Frequent self-evaluation, teacher conferences, and peer feedback help students hone performative habits, develop audience awareness, and reflect on their learning. The course addresses some of the most prominent academic oral communication concerns of graduate students.

Keywords: Academic Oral Communication, Interdisciplinary, Audience Awareness, Reflection, Pedagogical Innovation

While the field of graduate communication is steadily emerging, both scholarly research and teaching materials focus primarily on writing (e.g., Simpson et al., 2016) or on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses where writing is the dominant concern (Ho, 2011; Lee & Lee, 2018). Consequently, there is still much work to do in relation to identifying the unique academic communication needs of graduate students and the teaching approaches to best meet these needs. Though not all graduate students and programs will have time or make time for a dedicated English oral communication course, the oral academic skills of English language learners may be sources of intense anxiety (Kao & Craigie, 2018) and a barrier to success (Woolston & Osório, 2019). For example, Kim's (2006) oft cited study on the concerns of East Asian international graduate students highlights these sources of anxiety, including aspects of oral communication that students considered most important such as oral presentations and listening comprehension. Zappa-Hollman's (2007) research also showed that non-native English speaking graduate students found academic presentations daunting due to the difference in expectations between their overseas university and their previous educational contexts (for instance, talking extemporaneously as opposed to rote memorization). With such widely reported anxiety, the importance of academic oral presentation skills for graduate students cannot be underestimated. In fact, graduate students' participation in oral presentations not only factors into their successful course progress but also forms part of their enculturation and apprenticeship into disciplinary academic discourse communities (Morita, 2000). Furthermore, the quality of students' academic presentations can impact potential grant funding (Galbraith et al., 2014) demonstrating the professional importance of oral presentations beyond the classroom. In the following chapter, we present a pedagogical model for a graduate-level academic oral communication skills course that directly addresses the above concerns, with a primary emphasis

on a reflective and formative communication pedagogy that helps students develop academic presentation skills while reducing performance anxiety.

The Graduate Academic Communication Skills (GACS) course under discussion takes place at a newly formed English-medium, Sino-US, joint-venture university. This research and liberal-arts oriented university aims to provide an interdisciplinary undergraduate and graduate curriculum to an international student body. Approximately 30% of undergraduate students come from other countries; however, approximately 90% of the graduate students are Chinese nationals. There are currently four graduate programs: computer engineering, international environmental policy, global health, and medical physics. Further, most of the graduate students spend one semester of their respective two-year programs at the joint-venture's U.S. partner university. With this context in mind, the GACS curriculum is intended to help graduate students succeed in their research and/or professionally focused graduate school programs as well as during their time abroad.

GACS is a compulsory, one-semester, credit/no credit course that forms part of the graduate programs' curricula. Upon successful admission to their respective graduate programs, all students whose first language is not English take written and spoken English language tests, the scores of which determine entry to the GACS course. The interdisciplinary nature of the graduate programs means that a student with a background in economics may need to work with students who have a public policy or environmental conservation background, and they may not have enough shared English vocabulary to complete their tasks. In this context, it was important to help students build their confidence using oral English skills in an academic setting, as opposed to relying on Mandarin, by providing many opportunities to practice speaking to an interdisciplinary audience, with meaningful feedback from both peers and the instructor.

To encourage interdisciplinary academic communication, students from across the graduate programs are mixed so that each 12-student GACS section comprises students from different disciplines. For instance, one section would have a few students from medical physics, a few from environmental policy, and others from computer engineering. Moreover, the course occurs as the first part of a two-course sequence, with students taking an academic writing course in the spring semester. In terms of curriculum, the primary course objectives, which form the focus of this chapter, aim to develop students' academic presentation skills, including principles of visual design. Although they do not feature in this chapter, further secondary course objectives focus on developing academic discussion skills, rhetorical knowledge, fluency and grammatical accuracy, intelligibility and controlled emphasis, and local writing skills. To accomplish these objectives, the course curriculum is organized around structured in-class discussions, five short presentations, and a conference-length presentation. For the purposes of conciseness, this chapter only focuses on the presentations.

One of the larger, ideological assumptions that the course makes is that effective communication is partly about rhetorical awareness; that is, using the language most appropriate for a given audience and situation. Thus, the curriculum strives to help students develop sociolinguistic competence and confidence through instruction in language (Reinhart, 2013) and interdisciplinary awareness (Newell & Luckie, 2019). Moreover, the course assumes that continuous practice, feedback and reflection will enable students to hone the performative aspects of effective academic communication in real world situations (Ritchie 2016; Suzuki et al., 2019; Van Ginkel et al., 2015). Consequently, the GACS curriculum adopts a schedule of regular formative assessment of students' academic oral communication performance to provide opportunities for such feedback and reflection.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Performative Habit Building

The process of building performative habits is core to the underlying theory of the GACS pedagogy. This phrase, "building performative habits," refers to building confidence and reducing performance anxiety through presentation task repetition and has been influenced by two strains of research: the benefits of task repetition and recent work on public speaking anxiety. For task repetition, Fukuta (2016) finds that learners who engage in the same task twice are more focused on the concepts involved in their speech than the syntax during their second attempt. In other words, students get better at both audience awareness and performance when the fundamental moves of an academic presentation and language to carry out those moves are repeated over time. Studies on task repetition and oral English have found similar results (Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2010; Baleghizadeh & Asadi, 2013; Bygate, 2018; Gass et al., 1999). Specific to oral presentations, a synthesis of 47 studies in oral presentation competence by Van Ginkel et al. (2015) notes that practicing presentations improves performance, competence, and confidence, while also reducing apprehension.

Coupled with the idea of repetitive tasks in the context of an academic oral English course is the well documented phenomenon of public speaking anxiety, an anxiety further complicated by a second language (Akkakoson, 2016; Kao & Craigie, 2018; Woodrow, 2006) and the psychologically challenging task of beginning graduate study (Casanave, 2008). Studies on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and young learners have found that "enactive mastery experience," or an individual's previous experiences with a given task, can positively impact their future performance (Britner & Pajares, 2006; Joët, et al., 2011). Specific to an EFL context, Zhang and Ardasheva (2019) found that an individual's past experience has a large impact on an

EFL learner's English public speaking self-efficacy, and more broadly in an American undergraduate context, LeFebvre et al. (2020) found that students reported reductions in public speaking anxiety and their idiosyncratic fears after delivering multiple presentations in front of audiences. In sum, by building performative habits over time students learn to more comfortably inhabit the identity of an academic presenter by developing familiarity with common moves and language for academic presentations.

Interdisciplinary Audience Awareness

Interdisciplinary audience awareness is the second theoretical principle upon which we base the GACS pedagogy. We define interdisciplinary audience awareness as the ability to adapt one's language for the purposes of different audiences; more specifically, it is the awareness of what is likely common knowledge between the speaker and the listener and what terms or concepts may need to be explained in more detail. Because three of the four graduate programs are interdisciplinary by nature (environmental policy, global health, and medical physics), our students benefit from developing explicit knowledge of varied audiences and potential disciplinary differences.

To achieve this goal, the GACS curriculum design follows Borrego and Newswander's (2010) four elements of interdisciplinary scholarship: "disciplinary grounding," "integration," "communication and translation across interdisciplinary boundaries," and "critical awareness" (pp. 66-69). First, students are asked to complete short, discipline-focused presentations, which gives them an opportunity to become grounded in their own discipline by presenting ideas from their field to their peers. For integration, the course applies Newell and Luckie's (2019) recommendation to integrate classes. This provides the opportunity for students from multiple programs to work together, give each other feedback, and discuss issues that "necessitate

interdisciplinary approaches" (Newell & Luckie, 2019, p. 10). In the process of giving cross-disciplinary feedback, students identify areas of common ground in their discipline as well as cognates that have different usages, which promotes effective communication. Finally, the process of presenting ideas to students from other disciplines helps students view their own discipline more objectively. First-year graduate students are likely to take the ideas presented in their classes as "fact," but students from other disciplines will more readily question the concepts and validity of the ideas presented in other fields. These questions help students develop a critical lens of the scholarship they are exposed to in their field.

Reflection

Finally, the principles of reflection and metacognitive reflection also inform the GACS pedagogy and curriculum. Flavell (1976) defines metacognition as "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products" (p. 232) and first proposed the link between metacognition and learning. For the GACS course, we agree with Belcher (2010) and Negretti and Kuteeva (2011) who argue that successful English for Specific Purposes (ESP) genre-based academic instruction should promote metacognitive awareness. It is our view that a well-planned process of regular student and instructor reflection, as suggested by Farrell (2018), is required to facilitate metacognition. This is supported by Silver (2013) who identifies reflection as a practice that can lead to successful metacognitive awareness. To increase metacognition, Ibabe and Jauregizar (2010) recommend incorporating regular self-assessment into the curriculum which is supported by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) who advocate utilizing formative assessment strategies that provide opportunities for self and peer assessment. As such, the GACS pedagogy adopts a learning-focused approach to feedback (Winstone & Carless, 2020) by maximizing formative opportunities for students to receive and use tutor, self, and peer feedback.

Specifically, video recordings of all students' presentations are used to promote reflection, which have been shown to improve oral presentation performance (Ritchie, 2016) without increasing student anxiety (Bourhis & Allen, 1998).

Academic Communication Skills Course Assignments

Overview

Throughout the Academic Communication Skills course there are six presentations. Four individual presentations are in common academic presentation genres: professional introductions; describing a data visual; explaining a process; and explaining a concept. One presentation (called "the imitation") focuses on emphasis and prosody by having students act out a scene from an English language television show in pairs. Finally, students give one conference-length presentation at the end of the course that also serves as a campus wide showcase of their work called the Graduate Student Colloquium. (See *Figure 1*).

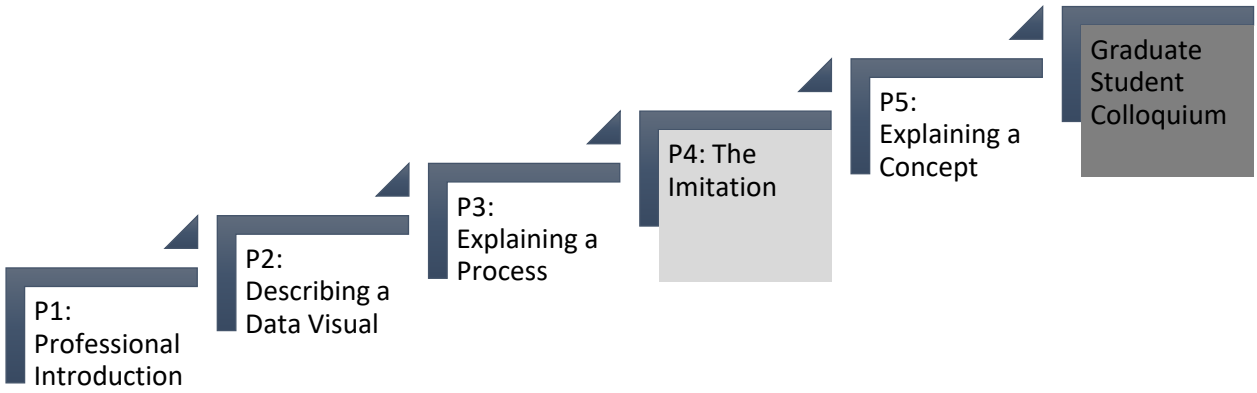

Figure 1: Sequence of Presentations in GACS

Mini-presentations

Studies in graduate and other research-oriented presentations have concentrated on long-form presentations (Kaur & Ali, 2017), discussing genre and language in graduate seminars

(Weissberg, 1993), peer seminars (Aguilar, 2004), academic conferences generally (Dubois, 1980; Wulff et al., 2009), and specific parts of presentations such as introductions (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005; Andeweg et al., 1998). However, the core of the GACS course is a series of five 3-5-minute low-stakes, formative presentations that focus on skill building. These short, low-stakes presentations are meant to help students present field specific concepts and data; however, our focus on the "mini-genres" of visuals, processes, concepts and introductions are general enough such that regardless of the discipline, students will be able to supply their own content (Reinhart, 2013). Moreover, because these mini-genres are designed to accomplish specific goals, they make it possible to offer students specific phrases and collocations to aid in accomplishing these tasks. For example, when presenting visuals and processes there are common moves and phrases that presenters can use to clarify material (Reinhart, 2013). The presentations are sequenced such that the common tasks (introductions) and more easily structured tasks (presenting visuals and processes) precede the more difficult and less structured tasks (presenting a concept and the Graduate Student Colloquium).

Overall, the mini-presentations serve to prepare learners for both their continued course work in their respective interdisciplinary fields of study as well as academic and professional contexts beyond graduation as students independently select presentation topics related to their discipline. To demonstrate the variety of interdisciplinary themes presented, in one class students described processes such as how a CT scan works, how to develop a Central Processing Unit (CPU), and how to conduct a medical randomized trial; they also explained concepts such as humanitarian crisis, computer peer-to-peer networking, and Murphy's Law to peers from across disciplines.

To promote reflection (Ibabe & Jauregizar, 2010) and improve performance (Ritchie, 2016), each presentation is video recorded so that after class, students can watch their performance and the presentations of classmates again to complete self and peer-evaluations. As students evaluate the presentations of peers from other disciplines, the peer feedback received provides useful insight into the presentation's success at communicating to an interdisciplinary audience. For example, peer reviewers can pinpoint language or concepts that were not adequately explained by the speaker. Following this process, students meet with the instructor one-on-one to discuss their performance in order to encourage teacher and peer dialogue about learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The "imitation" presentation diverges from the steady academic focus of the course and instead asks pairs of students to perform a short scene from an English-language television show of their choice. In preparing for this presentation, the course curriculum explores varied word stress, emphasis pattern, reduction and linking strategies that students use to annotate their chosen scripts before performing. Not only then is the imitation a break from the more rigorous academic curriculum but an opportunity for students to focus on intelligibility and/or prosody that can, in turn, enhance the delivery of a student's message.

In addition to the presentations themselves, students also learn question and answer procedures for the mini-presentations describing a data visual; explaining a process; and explaining a concept. Following from curriculum developed for the Purdue University Oral English Proficiency Program (OEPP), these procedures encourage students to check-in with the question asker and clarify the question, repeat or rephrase the question for audience members who may not have heard the question, answer the question, and then check back in with the asker. As the semester progresses, students are encouraged to engage with the audience during Q

& A in varied ways. For example, rather than relying on formulaic clarification strategies such as "Are you asking me if...," students will repeat key words or rephrase the entire question.

A final note on pedagogy and assessment in relation to the mini-presentations. We assess these presentations formatively via "low-stakes" means, giving students time and space to reflect, interpret, and act upon feedback, in line with the new paradigm approach to feedback (Winstone & Carless, 2020). Though we give numerical scores on a 5-point scale and extensive qualitative written and verbal feedback on performances, students are given credit/no-credit for the completion of a presentation. Specific to the feedback, there are four primary categories: organization, language, delivery, supporting materials, and Q&A procedures. Instructors and peers rate each presenter in these categories and add notes specific to their performance. For example, one might note the lack of eye contact during the presentation or praise the skillful use of transitions. Scores on the five-point scale do not impact the grades students receive and are meant to be a rating of the quality of the presentation only. That is not to say, however, that standing in front of a group of classmates and instructor is low-stakes. Even for the most confident of presenters and especially for first-year graduate students, many are presenting in English for the first time. By stressing a constant stream of qualitative feedback over a grading-scale, students may not be as plagued by "testing-anxiety" (Horowitz et al., 1986), which thereby lightens their cognitive load and allows them to focus on feedback, reflection, (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and feedforward (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010) to improve subsequent performances. Moreover, we want our students to *learn to be comfortable* when presenting, which has been found, in terms of the delivery of a presentation, to have a positive impact on both the confidence and language abilities of students (Masmaliyeva, 2014).

Graduate Student Colloquium

The mini-presentations provide the scaffolding, reflective space and feedback, through multiple task repetitions, that naturally build towards the Graduate Student Colloquium (GSC). This colloquium, forming the final course assessment, provides graduate students with an authentic and meaningful opportunity to present their research or an issue in their discipline to the university community. We place this high-stakes presentation at the end of the course to increase learner motivation to engage with the input and repetitive process of mini-presentation preparation, performance, and metacognitive reflection. For example, as the GSC is attended by students, faculty and staff from varied programs and divisions, this increases students' need to develop skills for presenting to multidisciplinary audiences.

Specifically, students work in pairs based on shared research interests to present collaboratively, incorporating the skills and techniques covered in previous mini-presentations, during interdisciplinary panel sessions. In addition to the academic presentation, students must also develop suitable presentation titles and abstracts to arouse audience interest and encourage attendance to the GSC and their panel. Such academic tasks form useful topics for in class discussions and promote interdisciplinarity as students work across disciplines to form suitable and coherent panel themes. Additionally, working with the genre of titles and abstracts links well to the upcoming academic writing course. Importantly, the GSC presentations provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate the academic oral communication skills developed during the course in an authentic academic context outside the classroom. For example, students have previously collaborated to present on topics such as climate change challenges, imaging methods for breast cancer screening, nuclear radiation, endangered wildlife product trade, preventing Alzheimer's, and Apple face ID safety concerns. Finally, in line with the principles behind the course, all GSC presentations are video recorded for students to self-evaluate and

reflect comparing their first mini-presentation and final GSC performances. As with the other presentations, the GSC is assessed based on the same criteria using the same feedback forms and self/peer evaluation tools.

Course Reflections

The course's designation as credit/no credit is central to the idea of helping students learn to be more comfortable while presenting because this allows instructors to deemphasize letter grades and emphasize learning-focused formative and reflective feedback (Winstone & Carless, 2020), which has been shown by various studies to reduce performance anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019) and improve Second Language Acquisition (Carless et al., 2011). While this "freedom" of credit/no credit may not be available to every graduate oral English instructor, the larger takeaway is that anxiety laden performative tasks can be made easier for students through continual low-stakes formative assessment, and the event of a given speech-act can begin to feel commonplace through normalizing performance. By finding ways to deescalate anxiety around in-class and public performance, we can help our students better focus their attention on the complex concepts, language, and social practices of graduate school.

Specific to the approach described above, our students have reported a number of positive outcomes attained through this course approach. For example, when reflecting upon their development throughout the course, by comparing first and final presentation performance video recordings, students reported significant improvements. One student reflected, "When I compare my first presentation to the final presentation I was much more confident, was able to prepare better and didn't need any notes. My body language and eye contact were much better as well as the Q&A procedures. I don't need to memorize the script anymore". A second student echoed this, "In the first presentation I was so nervous but in the final presentation I felt very confident

and was able to use the presentation strategies from our class naturally. I'm definitely a much better presenter after taking this course".

More specifically, students' confidence and competence in academic presentations and other speaking tasks noticeably improves throughout the course. For instance, on a course evaluation, one student wrote, "I learned to feel more comfortable and less nervous in front of others on the stage." Another reported "the presentation part are so useful that I think I can do a good presentation even on a conference." Students also reported that they were better able to organize their presentations and handle the systematic question-and-answer procedures. Furthermore, students report benefiting greatly from the opportunity to discuss presentation performances and tutor/self/peer feedback with their professor during individual conferences. One student stated that "Conferences with instructor is the most helpful part to me. I always learn a lot from it." Another commented that "one-and-one meeting is really helpful for me to get the feedback of my strength or weakness from the professor. From this conversation, I know exactly what areas I have to work on to make improvement."

It was also clear that students value the repetitive and reflective nature of regularly performing, re-watching, and self/peer evaluating. Students commented that this process helped them raise awareness of their specific presentation strengths and weaknesses which they subsequently used to make future improvements. In particular, students found self-evaluation to be helpful for their overall learning and development. One student wrote, "I love the video recording. I can review them to understand my weak skills in my presentations." Another student echoed this sentiment, noting that "watching the presentation video of ourselves helps a lot." A third student reported transferring these self-evaluative tools to other courses and areas of learning, explaining that this course was the first time she had been asked to reflect on her

learning, and she modified the self-evaluation tasks from GACS for her other classes. Interestingly, several students indicated that there was more value in completing self-evaluation than peer evaluation as peer evaluation depends upon classmates' efforts and attention to detail.

However, we still feel that there are areas of the course that need further consideration and potential modification. The first concern is the extent to which the course develops students' ability to reach a broad and varied audience. Although student placement in multidisciplinary class groups allows for the opportunity to encounter audiences that lack subject discipline knowledge, classes are still heavily homogenized. For example, students are mostly Chinese, sharing cultural, educational, and language learning backgrounds (in the sense that they share certain grammatical constructions, word choice and pronunciation features that are specific to Chinese English language learners of their generation). Furthermore, the success of the GSC and degree to which the audience body is interdisciplinary largely depends on attracting a successful turnout. Therefore, increasing awareness of the event and its benefits to students across the university is important.

Implications and Recommendations

In light of the reflections above, for instructors teaching a graduate academic oral course or for instructors hoping to include more oral English components in their courses, we make a few general suggestions followed by suggestions specific to the content and experiences of our course. First, linked presentations and/or discussions that focus on qualitative and reflective formative assessments can reduce testing-anxiety and build positive performative habits and confidence. Second, increasing the amounts of regular, high-quality instructor, self and peer feedback can increase noticing and improve language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990). Third, providing authentic opportunities, such as the GSC, can provide a long-term and tangible goal

for positive washback (Green, 2013). In other words, any public presentation of research outside of the classroom context is usually high-stakes in the sense that a fear of public speaking is common for most of us, regardless of one's language background. Thus, we recommend letting the situation of public speaking do the motivational work rather than focusing on letter grades and scores.

Specific to the curriculum described above, as metacognitive reflection forms one of the core principles of the course and is largely achieved through self and peer evaluation, we recommend explaining the benefits of peer evaluation to students for buy-in. For example, students should be aware of the benefits that peer evaluation can have on their own academic performance and sharing literature supporting this could help. One strategy adopted in the course following poor anonymous peer feedback of presentations was to adopt non-anonymous peer feedback. This provided ownership over the quality and depth of feedback provided and allowed follow-up discussion and clarification between reviewer and performer inside and outside the classroom.

Finally, for readers considering organizing a Graduate Student Colloquium, or similar event, we would suggest working with undergraduate programs in order to try and ensure increased attendance of undergraduate students. The benefits of this are twofold; firstly, graduate students can present to a wider multidisciplinary audience and secondly, undergraduate students can learn from the oral presentation skills of their peers and have the opportunity to explore the kinds of academic work students are completing in the graduate programs. Looking ahead, we are currently collaborating with the undergraduate EAP team at our university to try and build undergraduate student attendance at the GSC as a course requirement to achieve this objective.

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