Aspects of spoken presentations

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1. **Think back…**

   Think of any presentations, seminars, or lectures you have attended. These could be in university, or they could be at school or in social, or professional life.

   Who were the most effective speakers? Why?

   Identify the main positive and negative aspects you have observed in spoken presentations. These could be related to language, structure, organisation, time management, use of visual media and even the layout and furnishing of the room.

   Discuss these with any fellow students you are about to do presentations with (as a team) or alongside (as an individual)

Positive	Negative
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•	
•	
•	

   etc.

2. **Written and spoken style**

   When making an oral presentation, it is necessary to consider a few points in the preparation of the work you intend to present. Many people rely too heavily on written text, either as manuscripts of their topic or as PowerPoint slides (or similar). Can be problematic for a number of reasons.

   - Sentence length is considerably different in written and spoken style. We use much shorter sentences and fragments of sentences when we speak.

- When speaking normally we are able to take turns, but in a formal presentation setting we cannot do this and are unable to negotiate meaning if something is not clear.
- When reading we can stop and re-read as often as we like.
- This is not generally done when listening to a formal presentation, so sentences should not have written complexity.
- Not many people sound good when reading from a manuscript that is intended as written language and prosodic features (patterns of intonation in and across sentences) may be in the wrong place. This creates a monotone effect in the voice.
- The monotonous sound has a sedative effect on the brain, which sends people to sleep.

3. Business presentations

The most successful presenters are quite often from business and corporate settings. In business a good presentation may mean the difference between financial success and failure.

Techniques used by business presenters often work very well in short academic presentations, as they represent a simple and structured use of *boundary markers.* In English it is important to signal the structure and changes that *will* occur in your speaking. This serves the essential purpose of letting your audience know how long your presentation will be, how long each section of it will be, and where to expect changes.

This is significantly important in keeping the attention of the listener, as they will be able to gauge the timing of the presentation. Otherwise, what may really be a short discussion may seem to go on for a long time.

The most common technique for doing this is to follow the three-stage *introduction, main body, conclusion* pattern, using a well-controlled pattern of information whereby the listener always knows what is about to happen.

The most commonly repeated advice for structuring a presentation is the "Tell them, tell them, tell them" principle.

a) Tell them what you are going to tell them (introduction)
b) Tell them what you are here to tell them (body of the presentation)
c) Tell them what you have told them (conclusion)

Consider the structure of your own presentation. What information will you need to include to:

a) present a concise, but informative introduction;
b) ensure that the main body of the discussion covers the points made in the introduction in a staged and transitioned sequence;
c) be able to allow for audience participation in the presentation;
d) summarise the presentation in a brief conclusion.

4. Aspects of spoken presentations: Questions and answers

When allowing time for questions during, or at the end of a presentation, it is always necessary to consider the issue of *difficult* questions. While we expect to be prepared for questions, members of the audience may be thinking along lines that we are not prepared for.

QUESTION
What would you say to your audience if you did not know the answer to a question? The whole audience is watching you… how would you try to find a suitable answer?

ANSWER
That's a very interesting question. I don't have an immediate answer, but would anybody be able to offer any thoughts on that?

This usually sets up further discussion, the question either gets answered, or you are able to defer until later if no answer is available.

5. Rhetorical aspects of speaker and audience perceptions

Below are four critical questions that you can ask yourselves in relation to this exercise and further planning and development up to the final stages of the project (based on McCarthy & Hatcher, 2002: 14-15).

a. **What crucial questions is the audience likely to ask?**

When listening you are likely to be engaged in thinking about what you want to get out of a discussion. We can see this in the way that politicians often answer questions with questions, or just deliberately change the topic until the questioner loses interest in pursuing the thread of the argument. But what is on the audience's mind? This often depends on the topic and current events surrounding it. Consider the types of questions that you have been asked and whether they would be indicative of the type of questions a general audience may ask.

b. **"What's in it for me?"**

So what do you want to get out of the discussion? As a presenter you are holding the discussion after all and have the right to steer it in directions that suit your aims (the audience may well challenge this through the questions though). A degree of active listening is required here in order to formulate a "working" response as opposed to a pre-conditioned response—one that is likely to suggest real communication with the audience. We all know how annoying it is when we are passed off with set responses by local government officials, doctors, and politicians, not to mention *teachers*.

c. **"What do I want to say?"**

You may have already decided the course of the presentation and the interaction between the sub-topics contained within it. It is the interaction with an audience though, that will have a direct strategic effect on how you say it a second time. Interpreting audience characteristics is very important in knowing how to pitch the discussion and equally importantly, which aspects of it to emphasise. How will you match the needs of your listeners with your own needs as a speaker?

d. **“What is the most effective way of constructing and presenting the particular things I want to say to achieve my purpose?”**

   In knowing both topic and listeners and the relationship between both of them *and* yourselves as listeners/speakers (b & c above), you will be able to work with the construction, dissemination and negotiation of “knowledge” to come to a mutually acceptable understanding of the topic. This is active discourse in a given context at its best. In this setting we need to overcome fear of controversy, criticism and change and embrace the uncertainty that the exercise presents.

6. **Plan for final presentation**

Individual plan / Team plan (add members and main roles):

Project title:

Aims:

Focus of final presentation:

Medium: Oral presentations with support using _____

(e.g. video, audio, web-site, PowerPoint, photographs, etc.)

Contents:

Section	Sub-section	Timing	Presenter / notes
Introduction	**Welcome**	_____	_____
	Focus/aims	_____	_____
	Sequence	_____	_____
	Type of interaction	_____	_____
Body	**Issue 1** **Interaction?**	_____	_____
	Issue 2 **Interaction?**	_____	_____
	Issue 3 **Interaction?**	_____	_____
	etc.		
Conclusion	**Summary**	_____	_____
	Implications	_____	_____

Questions and answers from audience

Questions and answers prepared for audience (in case they do not ask any)

Common problems with language and structure:

Each of the points listed below has been observed in student presentations many times. These are among the most common errors made with language and structure:

- Brief welcome
- Indication of team members (where appropriate)
- Identification of presentation topic
- Aims of presentation: this may be a specific aspect of the topic or a general overview
- Indication of structure and timing
- When to ask questions
- Indication of transitions: summarising the current point, indication that you are moving on or changing to another speaker
- Statement of what the new section is about by the same, or another speaker
- Specific signposting of points as the presentation develops.
- Pace of speaking: signposting has the effect of slowing the pace and enhancing clarity, which is especially useful where vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar points may be unfamiliar to the speaker
- Overall conclusion to summarise the points in the presentation
- Eye contact and body language: be careful not to put too much text in the PowerPoint; it causes speakers and audience to read too much
- Add citations to all images and text where appropriate and include a list of references at the end of the PowerPoint
- Prepare questions to ask the audience in case they don't ask any

Bibliography

The following resources (available in Hugh Owen Library) give very useful examples of language, style, structure and many other aspects of presentations. They are essential reading for anybody who wants to develop presentation skills.

Dignen, B. (1999). Down to Business: English for Presentations. York & Kuala ***Lumpur:*** York Associates & Falcon Press.

Mc Carthy, P. & Hatcher, C. (2002). *Presentation Skills: The Essential Guide for Students.* London: Sage.