

## AN ACTION RESEARCH DESIGNED STUDY TO IMPROVE THE PRESENTATION SKILLS OF UNDERGRADUATES

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### Abstract

*Presentation skills are the most important skills in undergraduate's life as they need to present on topics, projects and academic ideas in almost every subject but when it comes to communicate in English Language classes, the task becomes even more challenging as students find it difficult to express themselves in English. The current work presents action research which identified problems in learners speaking and devised action plan to implement various strategies grouped in two main sections; a) speaking activities in class b) external examiner to evaluate the final presentations of students. The research attempts to find out that how various speaking activities performed in class room can improve students' presentation skills and in what ways the presence of an external examiner influence the presentations of undergraduates. The study includes 110 ESL learners at 3rd semester of Undergraduate level. Action research design was implemented on two sections of English Language Classes to improve students' presentations and communication skills. The data was collected through class observations, questionnaire and interviews. Findings indicate that persistent speaking activities and external examiner is a good step and has a positive effect on learners' presentation skills.*

**Keywords:** *Presentation skills, action research, communication skills*

### 1. Introduction

In order to improve students' communication skills, many teachers practice speaking activities in their classes. On the other hand, most learning institutions incorporate external examiners to provide an independent view that ensures the processes are done at the highest levels possible and with as little bias as possible (Osimiri, O'Sullivan, & Okogbule, 2009). This paper attempts to combine these two strategies to see how they impact undergraduates' final presentations using action research as a framework since it is a method emphasizing ongoing improvement and reflection (Barker, P, 2007). Final presentations are very important because it provides a concise overview of all knowledge, abilities, and competencies that students have obtained during their academic careers (Rodríguez Rodríguez, 2022). Since teachers understand that good communication ability is esteemed by both the academic world and professional circles, they use a group of tactics to improve the presentation abilities of students (Abarca Alulema, V. A., 2024). Some of these tactics include personalized mentoring, utilizing technology, practice sessions, peer reviews, and interactive workshops to improve presentation skills (Chakravarti, 2023)

External examiners add value to assessment not only by guarding against biases internally but also by ensuring that broad academic and professional norms are maintained, increasing the legitimacy and fairness of the evaluation process (Medland, E., 2015). Through an action research paradigm focusing on reflective practice seeking continuous learning, this study investigates the influence of external examiners on final presentations among undergraduates (Hannan, A., & Silver, H, 2006). Action research is a method which helps the teachers and examiners to experience and identify the methods that promote student learning and growth because assessment procedures are continuously analyzed and improved (Cunningham, B. M, 2008). This is due to the incorporation of many examples previously prepared, observed, and acted on as informed by the lessons learned with the ideals of improving instructional

methods and student outcomes (McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). The action research in language classes is wise since teachers are made to upgrade their methodologies as instructed by immediate feedback and students' success (Burns, Edwards, & Ellis, 2022). It motivates educators to sustain a continuous process of fine-tuning their procedures to better serve students and creates a mindset for continuous improvement (Medland, E., 2015).

Action research can be assigned to how particular educational difficulties can be targeted and teaching and learning results improved; it is summarized as a systematic process typified by iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The first stage or step in the Action Research process is selecting an issue or area of interest that needs improvement (Abetty, 2023). This phase often involves a close look at the practices in place and identifying their shortcomings or problems that impact student performance (McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). The next step is designing an intervention or strategy to address the problem after it has been precisely identified. This involves developing lesson plans, exercises, or evaluation strategies that cater to the specific needs that have been identified—for instance, ripple classes, feedback discussions, and electronic resources to enhance the public speaking talents of students will all add up in presentation skills enhancement (Abetty, 2023). In the implementation stage, the developed plan is put into effect in the classroom. The designed exercises and interventions are carried out by instructors, ensuring that this happens consistently for the targeted student population. It is critical to remain flexible and ready to change based on immediate data and feedback during this period (Abetty, 2023). Data gathering is an essential part of action research since it provides facts to be used in assessing whether the adopted strategy is well used or not. Some techniques that one might use to collect data include questionnaires, interviews, observational notes, and assessment of students' work (Bheaglaioich, 2021).

The next important step is the analysis of the collected data. Analyzing data may also underline trends, benefits, and drawbacks of the teaching strategy and show how it influences students' communication skills in general and presentation skills in particular (McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). At reflective phase, the teachers consider the intervention's effects and take into consideration one's observations while including the findings from the analysis of data. Reflection helps educators examine how their activities affect students' learning and determine what can be changed (Abetty, 2023). According to recent research findings, the advantage of action research is that it creates a learning environment where the atmosphere and settings are dynamic. The culture promoted by action research is that of continuous development, which enables a teacher to adjust to the emerging needs of their students (McNiff, 2013). It helps the teachers enhance the quality of education as a whole and facilitates students in succeeding to acquire critical skills like speaking in public and effective communication by systematically assessing and improving their teaching methods (McNiff, 2013).

Action research has proven to be extremely beneficial in languages classes, as it has helped enormously by allowing teachers to adjust and improvise their teaching methods so they are best suited for the students and their future (Burns, 2009). Besides, action research gives freedom to educators in adapting new and modify lesson plans according to immediate feedback viewed from results out of encouragement of an iterative process for enrichment of instructional strategies and chances of student learning (Ferris, Chen, Kang, & Svihla, 2022). Moreover, it is the cooperative character of action research that gives rise to the community—the very feeling by which teachers may share their successes and problems and gain insights (Kang et al., 2022). It is this type of collaboration that enriches creativity and quality in teaching techniques and thus improves teaching practices individually while enhancing educational progress at large. Accordingly, action research not only enhances the

effectiveness of instruction but also builds professional networks and creates a learning-friendly environment or atmosphere (Ferris, Chen, Kang, & Svihla, 2022).

Action research is a systematic process that targets educational difficulties and improves teaching and learning results through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. It involves selecting an issue, designing an intervention, implementing the plan, analyzing data, and reflecting on the results. Action research promotes continuous development, allowing teachers to adjust their teaching methods to meet student needs. It also fosters a dynamic learning environment, allowing teachers to adapt lesson plans based on feedback and fosters a cooperative community. This approach enhances teaching effectiveness, professional networks, and a learning-friendly atmosphere.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Techniques Used by Teachers to Improve Students Presentation Skills**

Teachers are aware that excellent communication is one of the most valued competencies both in higher education and in professional life; therefore, they apply several strategies for enhancing students' presentation skills (Chakravarti, 2023). Personalized mentoring is also used by various lecturers to provide each student with individualized feedback and guidance with a view to promoting the improvement of their presentation abilities. By focusing on students' strengths and addressing their individual weaknesses, teachers could improve overall performance (Chakravarti, 2023). Technology was also an effective strategy for improving presentation skills. For instance, video recording of practice presentations may be used to offer in-depth feedback since students are allowed to hear and see how they performed, therefore able to identify areas that need to improve.

### **2.2 Action Research in Education**

Teachers use appropriate action research to solve specific problems or challenges in their teaching, a systematic and iterative process (McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). It involves strategy cycles in performing observation and reflection to improve any educational outcome with continuous improvement feedback (Burns, Edwards, & Ellis, 2022). In language class venues, where it has particular utility, it can be used to design strategies for instruction and find ways to improve students' ability to present and, generally their interpersonal tendencies (Mills, 2000). The first stage of action research involves finding a problem or a potential area for improvement. After the gathering of an issue, the subsequent stage is to develop an action plan or intervention that would handle it (Mills, 2000). The implementation phase puts the plan into action. It consequently monitors the effectiveness of the plan (Burns, Edwards, & Ellis, 2022). To measure the effectiveness of the intervention, teachers collect information using various techniques, such as questionnaires, observational notes, and assessments of students (Mills, 2000). This information is then used to measure the effectiveness of the plan and identify areas for improvement (McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). Action research requires reflective practice because it is through reflective practice that educators can critically review their techniques and make judgments based on data (Burns, Edwards, & Ellis, 2022). It is through this continuous improvement approach that a dynamic and adaptable learning environment that supports student growth is created (Abarca Alulema, V. A., 2024).

### **2.3 Advantages of Action Research in Language Classroom**

Action research in language classroom helps in specific teaching issues or areas of improvement which are identified; focused interventions are selected, developed, and implemented; the data of their effectiveness is gathered; and the outcomes are reflected upon for guiding future modifications (Mertler, 2009). Participating in the action research will help

language teachers to seek appropriate teaching methods to suit their students better, who have different requirements from time to time. For instance, continuous reflection and data analysis can be used to evaluate several teaching strategies that improve students' speaking and presentation skills. The methods include interactive exercises, peer collaboration, and real-world communication assignments. Moreover, action research promotes a collaborative learning environment in which educators share their ideas and enhance even the best practices of each other (Abetty, 2023). Ultimately, this collaboration helps instructors as much as students by supporting professional growth and new ways of teaching (Mertler, 2009). Action research also challenges educators to question and critically analyze their current methods, leading to a greater understanding of pedagogical strategies that work (Abetty, 2023). Reflective practice guarantees that teachers will continue to be responsive to the changes in the needs of students and educational trends at the same time, promotes professional development and improvement in teaching effectiveness.

#### **2.4 Role of Speaking Activities**

Speaking skills are crucial for ESL learner as they ensure their social, academic and professional success. Casner-Lotto & Barrington (2006) claim that speaking skill is one the most required skill to be hired at multinational companies.

Educationalists have a very significant role in reducing the challenges faced by ESL learners in speaking English language (Paneerselvam, & Mohamad, 2019). According to Leong & Ahmadi (2016) this is teacher's responsibility to find the reasons which cause low speaking ability in students and they should also find ways to keep students engaged and motivated in speaking activities. Therefore, this work tries to find out the ways to unravel students' weak areas in speaking and then attempts to develop strategies to improve their speaking and presentation skills.

#### **2.5 Role of External Examiners**

The role of the external examiner is vital in higher education since it guarantees the integrity and quality of all kinds of academic assessments. To that effect, they offer an objective view, independent of any type of internal biases, hence, upholding academic challenges on standards of fairness (Osimiri, O'Sullivan, & Okogbule, 2009). Their task becomes highly relevant in summative assessments, for instance, undergraduates' final presentations, in which impartiality is an essential ingredient of evaluation (Kibble, 2017). External examiners have two significant roles: to examine procedures for assessment and to review student works to ensure consistency in the application of grading standards (Medland, E., 2015). This kind of self-confidence is needed to foster an accommodating and encouraging learning environment that can powerfully motivate learners to engage their subject matter in-depth and advance in communication competence (Osimiri, O'Sullivan, & Okogbule, 2009).

#### **2.6 Impact on Students**

When students know that an independent external examiner is involved in the process of assessment, then the belief in its fairness for the students would rise, and this might flow over to positively impact motivation and involvement with course material for them. It has been posited and proven that if students view the assessment process to be fair and comprehensive, they can easily accept and appreciate the comments they receive and as a result they will be ready to use such feedback, hence improving their performance and learning processes (Burns, Edwards, & Ellis, 2022). Another important aspect is that the consistency of the external examiners in applying grading norms reduces assessment objections and ensure improvement (McNiff, 2013). Such an unbiased evaluation benefits student since it increases their trust in the fairness of the examinations carried out by their institutions. This trust is necessary for developing a positive learning environment in which students appreciate the value placed upon them and become motivated toward attaining high academic levels of



achievement (Burns, 2009). It is usually observed that external examiners provide quality feedback, often beyond grading, which initiates improvement recommendations relating to current industrial standards and expectations (Burns, Edwards, & Ellis, 2022). Moreover, the involvement of external examiners in the assessment gives students control over their learning process.

### **3. Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following research questions?

Q1: Can we improve presentation skills of undergraduates by diverse speaking activities in classrooms?

Q2: Do undergraduates work more vigilantly on their presentation skills in order to present in front of an external examiner?

### **4. Methodology**

The researcher devised the following methodology in order to find out the answer of the proposed questions. It was taken care that each question is thought, planned and executed separately to find out exclusive answers of each.

#### **4.1 Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted in undergraduate English language classes of a private university in Lahore. The researcher implemented the same plan of action on two English classes; one section was of BS Psychology and second was enrolled in BS Chemistry. Overall 111 participants took part in the research, out of which 107 responses were found authentic to be included in data analysis. There were 50 females and 57 males aged between 19–21 and they belong to various geographical backgrounds.

#### **4.2 Problem Identification**

The researcher was also the teacher of both classes under study here. Both classes were in 3rd semester of undergraduate level and the researcher was teaching 'Communication Skills' course to them. It was noticed that students were very reluctant to speak in front of the class. As the main objective of the course was to make learners able to speak so the teacher and researcher devised the following plan of action.

#### **4.3 Plan of Action:**

At 1st place I observed and identified comparatively better speakers of each class and planned to represent them as an example setter of each activity. Then I devised and accompanied course topics with speaking activities and divided weekly two lectures into theory and practical implementation; for example if the topic is 'non verbal communication', session 1 was based on my lecture and session 2 was a speaking group or pair activity exhibiting the use of non-verbal communication cues in real life situation scenarios. Each class activity was announced graded to ensure students participation, motivation and seriousness.

The level of complexity of each class activity was raised gradually; initially it was ensured that each student participates, so they were allowed to bring reading material with them and no time frame was given.

At round 2, students were forbidden to bring any helping material. At level 3, each group was bound to complete 10 minutes of speaking in order to qualify for grading. At level 4, students were asked to speak individually on any given topic at the spot by teacher. The final round was based on a final group presentation for 15 - 20 minutes in front of an external examiner (the teacher invited different language teachers of the department to observe and evaluate students Final presentations and they were requested to ask critical questions and give remarks to each group as well). The students were also informed about the detailed procedure of external evaluation so that they could take the task seriously.

## 5. Data Collection & Analysis

The data was collected through class observations, questionnaire and interviews.

### 5.1 Class Observations:

Class observations helped the researcher to understand the responses and reactions to each activity. Each activity was accompanied with teacher/researcher extensive remarks. Students who didn't show much improvement were counseled and were given different strategies to handle their individual problems.

### 5.2 Questionnaire:

The data collected through questionnaire were organized, coded and compared as Burns (1999) suggested ways.

As the questionnaire was shared through Google survey so the responses were received both in pie charts and excel sheet. The questionnaire had close ended questions followed by 5 options based on Likert scale. The percentage of each option is demonstrated against each questionnaire item so that a complete picture of overall scenario can be built.

### 5.3 Semi-structured Interviews:

For interviews six students from each section were selected on the basis of highest, average and lowest scorers in Final presentations. They were asked to give their responses about the speaking activities and effect of external examiner on their speaking and presentation skills.

The responses which were gathered through audio recordings were transcribed, categorized and compared. The main categories were the positive impact, negative impact and suggestions for improvement.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Class Observations

Class observations were specifically done with reference to speaking activities conducted during the semester. It was observed that some students were highly reluctant in the beginning but when a complete plan was shared and announced graded, students started taking it seriously.

The technique of making these activities consistent, graded and diverse gave fruitful results as people who were not comfortable in groups performed well in pairs and individual tasks. Moreover, the role of assigning grades to each speaking activity did wonders as learners realized that there was no escape from the practice and skipping them would affect their grades so they participated actively and seriously.

### 6.2 Questionnaire

The findings of the questionnaire survey indicate in Table 1 that students have a very positive effect on their state of mind, preparation and execution of the final presentations. The table demonstrates high positive values in favor of external examiner for presentation evaluation. 84.6% students think that they become more conscious. Highly significant number of 86.4% learners admitted that they prepared their content more vigilantly. It also made learners practice their presentations more as 80.9% admitted this fact through questionnaire item no. 3 in Table 1. This practice also brought clarity about the presentation topics and it's evident in row no.4 with 85.6% responses in favor. The learners found this practice so much useful that 95.4% agreed that this would help them in real life as well. 88.2% believed that speaking skills activities helped them in improving their presentations. 86.4% learners were convinced that combination of speaking activities and external examiner was a good combination to enhance their presentation and speaking skills.

#### Table 1:

*Questionnaire Responses in Percentages*

Sr. No	Questions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Did you become more conscious when your teacher informed you about External Examiner in Presentation?	38.7%	45.9%	8.1%	5.4%	1.8%
2	Did you prepare your content more vigilantly?	39.6%	46.8%	7.2%	4.5%	1.8%
3	Did you practice your presentation more than usual?	40%	40.9%	10.9%	5.5%	2.7%
4	Did the questions by examiner help you understand your topic more clearly?	33.3%	52.3%	11.7%	1.8%	0.9%
5	Do you think this experience can help you in future?	63.6%	31.8%	2.7%	1.8%	-
6	Do you think speaking activities in class helped you in giving good presentation?	47.7%	40.5%	9%	1.8%	0.9%
7	Do you think speaking activities and external examiner was a good combination to improve your presentation and speaking skills?	46.8%	39.6%	4.5%	7.2%	1.8%

### 6.3. Interviews

The responses of the interviews were also in favor of these activities. Even the students with lowest scores in each section supported the speaking activities and external examiner and showed determination that they would work on their skills in future as well.

The one suggestion came from a highest achiever was to increase the level of competition among students by inviting students of different sections to the final presentations.

### 7. Discussion

As mentioned in section 1 by Rodríguez Rodríguez (2022), this paper reassures their stance that presentation skills are the most important outcome by the students and they reflect the overall learning of the learners. The results and findings of this paper certify that teachers' careful strategies can help students to polish their presentation skills as said by Chakravarti (2023) as referred in section 2.1.

The results of this research work endorse many earlier studies (Burns, Edwards, & Ellis, 2022; Burns, 2009; Mills, 2000). which emphasize on the importance of applying action research in language classrooms and its effectiveness with reference to improvement in required learning areas generally and presentation skills particularly.

The percentages in table 1 attest the effectiveness of strategies of speaking skills and external examiner through action research designed. It is worth noticing that more than 80% agreement is found in each aspect of the efficacy either its overall effect or the individual impact on content, preparation or question answer session during final presentations. As the

number of participants were 50% male and 50% female so it can be extracted that impact of the plan of action was equally beneficial for both the genders.

### 8. Conclusion

On the basis of findings and results, it can be concluded that students' speaking and presentation skills can be improved with the help of consistent efforts, by making relevant strategies and most importantly to make students participate actively. Inviting external examiners can increase the formality and seriousness level of the class environment and it can also be a great motivating factor to present themselves in front of someone who is unaware of their academic skills and performance earlier. The idea of external examiner can make the students more vigilant, more conscious, more prepared and overall an environment of giving their best in front of an outsider.

As a teacher and researcher I can say that class observations play a crucial role in identifying potentially good students to represent as initiator and at the same way finding the least interested learners help the teacher to deal with them separately; they should be given little leverages in order to make them an active part of the class. When the whole class presents, they all become observers for each other as well and it can be a great source of learning the skills and learning about each other together.

### 9. Limitations and Future Recommendations:

This study is limited to improve the speaking and presentation skills of two language classes only who were enrolled in BS Psychology and BS Chemistry programs respectively. There were mainly two strategies i.e. speaking practices and external examiner to improve their speaking and presentation skills.

The same strategies can be applied on various language classes for better communication skills. Moreover, diverse innovations can be applied to meet the various needs as per the needs of the language learners. An action plan can be made to improve other language skills i.e. reading, writing or listening as well.

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