

**Academic Oral Presentations: A Study of 5 Graduate Students in  
Taiwan**

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**Abstract**

This paper will examine how 5 graduate students in Taiwan participate in a graduate seminar which prepares students to make **academic oral presentations** in English. There are two purposes for this study. First, in comparison to reading, writing, and listening, speaking has received much less attention (Bygate, 1998; McCarthy & O’Keeffe, 2004). In addition, while there are many studies that have focused on academic writing skills (e.g., Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Horowitz, 1986; Kroll, 1979; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997), there are very few studies in academic speaking skills. Second, as English is becoming a dominant language of communication in many academic fields (Block & Cameron, 2003; Crystal, 1997, Graddol, 1997), it is critical for this study to examine how Taiwanese students gain competence in their academic oral skills in English.

This study will take a **socio-cultural perspective** in examining how students participate in their academic oral class. More specifically, Mohan (2003)’s social practice will be used as a unit of analysis. Mohan views a social practice as an interaction between the unit of cultural knowledge and the stream of behavior. Specifically, the social practice in this study is making academic oral presentations. How students participate in this social practice can be observed through what they do in making an oral presentation. At the same time, students’ participation in the social practice will also be shaped many factors such as their knowledge of the social practice, their background knowledge in making an oral presentation, their interaction with other participants and the expectation of the teacher and the larger academic field. To summarize, utilizing the social practice perspective, this study will attempt to explore the potentially complex relationship among several factors which may influence how students participate and views the action of making an oral presentation in English.

**Key words: oral presentations, English presentations**

**Research Problem**

This research project attempts to examine how five graduate students in Taiwan participate in a graduate seminar which prepares students to make academic oral presentations in English. This is an exploratory study which aims to examine the nature of academic oral presentation that students participate in. In other words, by

examining how students actually participate in making oral presentations in this class, one can capture the meaning these students assign to academic oral presentation. A survey of the literature provides several reasons for undertaking this project.

### **Literature Review**

First, it is important to examine Taiwanese graduate students' oral presentation skills in English because English is becoming a dominant language of communication in many academic fields. For example, one of the activities that scholars in academia engage in is sharing of their research through conferences. In many fields of study, the language used for presenting one's research especially in international conferences is English (Nunan, 2003). Furthermore, researchers in areas such as physics, chemistry, biology and psychology have claimed English to be their main language of communication (Block & Cameron, 2003; Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997). The pervasive use of English in many different academic fields provides the motivation for many graduate students in Taiwan to develop their skills in academic oral presentations. As such, there is a critical need to examine how these Taiwanese students gain competence in oral academic presentations.

The second reason for examining the issue of academic oral presentation skills is that research in this area is limited. Studies in the past have mostly focused on the development of academic writing skills (e.g. Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Horowitz, 1986; Kroll, 1979; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997). Furthermore, the very few research studies which focus on English speaking skills have examined learners studying in an English speaking country (e.g. Anderson-Hsieh, 1990; Bailey, 1984; William, 1992). The development of spoken academic English in the context of English as a foreign language has not received enough attention.

Third, within the few studies found, academic oral presentation can be viewed quite differently depending on the scholars. One area of research views academic oral presentations as an important method of assessing students' knowledge of the concept especially in higher education in western countries (e.g., Joughin, 2007; Stray, 2001; Kehm, 2001). Joughin (2007), for example, reports on students' perspectives of what an academic oral presentation is. He finds that students regard academic oral presentations as a test of their understanding of what they are studying.

Different from the perspective of viewing oral presentation as a method of assessment of knowledge learned, Zappa-Hollman (2007) and Morita (2000) view academic oral presentation as an activity that participants take part in so as to acquire academic competence in a specific field of study. More specifically, Zappa-Hollman(2007) examines six non-native graduate students as they participate in academic oral presentations in different fields of study. She finds that academic oral presentations to be an opportunity to practice English for these students while

learning the values promoted by the graduate courses they take.

Whether one views academic presentation as an assessment tool or as an activity to socialize one in, one important question that needs to be explored first is what constitutes an academic oral presentation for students. More specifically, before considering the function of the academic oral presentations, one must understand what it is first. Thus, it is the intention of this paper to explore what an academic oral presentation is.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

In this section, the assumptions this study takes will be outlined first. Following the description of the assumption, the theoretical perspective used to guide this study will be provided. More specifically, this study is a qualitative study which takes the socio-cultural perspective in investigating the issues.

#### **Research orientation**

This study takes the constructivist's paradigm "which assumes multiple, apprehendable, and sometimes conflicting social realities that are the products of human intellects, but that may change as their constructors become more informed and sophisticated" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). As such, the aim of inquiry for a constructivist is to understand and reconstruct a phenomenon. At the same time, this study takes the view of naturalism which "proposes that as far as possible, the social world should be studied in its 'natural' state, undisturbed by the researcher" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996, p. 6). By combining the constructivist's view of reality and the naturalist view of research, this study will utilize qualitative methods to try to understand and interpret the phenomenon of how Taiwanese graduate students participate and understand academic oral presentations. This way, deep insights into the phenomenon can be gained.

#### **Perspective guiding this study**

More specifically, this study will take a socio-cultural perspective in examining academic oral presentations. That is, this study believes in the interplay between human behavior under examination and the cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which the human behavior can be found. Mohan's social practice will be used as a unit of analysis (Mohan & Luo, 2005). Mohan views a social practice as an interaction between the unit of cultural knowledge and the stream of behavior. Specifically, the social practice in this study is making academic oral presentations. By observing what students do when they make an oral presentation, one can hope to understand the meaning the students assign to the presentation. At the same time, students' participation in the social practice will also be shaped by many factors such as their background knowledge of making an oral presentation, their interaction with other participants and the expectation of the teacher and the larger academic field.

To summarize, utilizing the social practice perspective, this study will attempt to explore the potentially complex relationship among several factors which may influence how students participate and view the action of making an oral presentation in English. Diagram 1 attempts to capture some of the factors that may influence the social practice of making an academic oral presentation.

Mohan proposes that a social practice can be studied by using two qualitative methods. Observations can be used to examine what the participants are doing. Interviews can be used to investigate what the participants believe about making oral presentations. By examining what participants do and what they believe about the social practice, it is hoped that the different factors that may influence what an academic oral presentation is can be better understood. In addition, difficulties and dilemmas that participants may have in making an academic oral presentation can be identified.

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Diagram 1: Potentially complex relationship in a social practice

### **Research Questions**

The two specific research questions following the broad research problem are:

1. What do the students do when they make an oral presentation?
2. What are their theories about making an academic oral presentation in English?

### **Methodology**

The participants included in this study are five first or second year students in their master's program in Taiwan, their research supervisors, and their course instructor. The students recruited for this project will be limited to students whose major is in TESOL (Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages). The method of recruitment will be of volunteering basis. Priority will be given to students who are willing to participate for the entire duration of the study.

Students will be observed weekly as they participate in their class for eighteen weeks. During the eighteen weeks, students will be required to make four presentations each. Each time the student makes a presentation, the presentation will be video-taped. After the presentation, the students will be interviewed. Also, students will keep weekly journals on their thought regarding making academic oral presentations. Their course instructor will be interviewed in the beginning, during the middle and at the end of the term. Each student's research supervisor, if there is one, will be interviewed also in order to identify the academic expectation of the field. The following table will summarize the different types of data collected.

Table 1: Summary of databank

Methods	Data collection schedule	Data collected
1. Class observation	Weekly observation of the class	18 weekly field notes
2. Video-recording of presentation	4 presentations x 5 students = 20 recordings	20 recordings
3. Interviews with students	4 interviews x 5 students = 20 interviews	20 interviews
4. Self-reports	18 weekly reports x 5 students = 90 reports	90 reports
5. Interview with course instructor	Beginning, middle, end of term	3 interviews
6. Interview with research supervisor	5 advisors during the term	5 interviews

### **Findings**

In the sections following, findings will be presented according to the two research questions proposed. The first question deals with what students actually do when they make an academic oral presentation. The data for this question came from triangulation of self-reports, classroom observation, and interviews with the students. The second question deals with students', the teacher's and the research advisor's belief regarding academic oral presentations. The data for this question came mostly from interviews of different participants.

### **Stages of Making Academic Oral Presentations**

Making academic oral presentations seemed to be a complex process that involves many decision making. Typically, students go through four stages. They are preparation stage, researching stage, rehearsing stage, and presenting stage. For each of the stages, students must make many decisions. These decisions sometimes can be quite dilemmatic for students. For example, one student wrote in his reflective journal that he had a great difficulty in cutting his presentation to twenty minutes only. While he understood the importance of being concise during a presentation, it was difficult for him to take out information he spent so long researching. After all, he wanted to show his teacher how hard he had worked on the

assignment. The dilemma for him is the risk of making a bad presentation or the risk of not being shown as a hardworking student.

### **Stage 1: Preparation**

In this stage, students had to decide the focus of their presentation. Brainstorming ideas is not difficult for students. However, choosing a focus for the presentation seems problematic for students. For example, in one presentation, the student wanted to present the result of her literature review on task-based learning. The student had read quite a few studies on task-based learning. The student's reflective journal describes her frustration in searching for a theme from the many articles she read.

I have read about the origin of task-based language teaching and learning. I have read studies in task-based learning in Taiwan. But, there are more studies about task-based teaching in English as a second language context. There are not too many studies in Taiwan. I think all these studies have some importance. But, I only have twenty minutes. I have been thinking about what to put in for the last two weeks. What is my theme? My teacher always asks me this. (self-report, October 18, 2006)

This example shows that the student needs to make a decision as to what needs to be discussed. Even before making a decision regarding what to put in the presentation, she needs to identify a theme she wants to discuss about task-based learning and teaching. As such, this excerpt demonstrates that even in the early stage of preparation when students are supposedly only brainstorming what to say, they encounter tough decisions. The preparation stage does not seem to be a simple task for students. The following interview can also demonstrate the difficulty of this stage for students.

I used to think that the preparation stage is the easiest. I have all the time I need to think about what I want to say. But, what I find is that it's not easy to decide what I want to say. I mean there are too many things I can say. I don't know what is important anymore. I like to present my opinion in classes but I find making a presentation is quite different from sharing my opinion. I mean I don't know how to be concise like my teacher wants. (Interview, October 15, 2006)

### **Stage 2: Researching stage**

In this stage, students need to locate information they need to read and transfer onto their presentation. The decisions that need to be made here may include the number of articles to be found, the type of articles to be read, the source of the articles and the physical location of the articles. In addition, the students need to constantly ask themselves if there is enough research. Although students did report that the decisions at this stage are not as difficult as the previous stage, it is nonetheless a labor-intensive task. The following interview and self-report will demonstrate this finding.

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To me, presenting something academic means that I have to find many different articles from good journals. I mean good journals are journals like TESOL Quarterly but the articles are hard to read. In a twenty minute presentation, I need to choose only a few good articles. But in order to find good articles, I may have to read three times as many articles. If I need four articles, I may need to find 12 articles first. I also had to go through all 12 in order to find the best one. My worry is that sometimes after reading the 12 articles, I can only use 1 or 2. This means I have to go back to the library again. Sometimes, going to one library isn't enough. (Interview, November 10, 2006)

I wish my teacher would just tell me how many articles I need to read in order to present well. What is enough? I think one is enough to present but I don't think that's what my teacher has in mind. My teacher told us about "synthesizing" today. I really don't understand what that means in terms of the number of articles. For my presentation next week, I have 6 articles. But, they are all short. Is that enough? Are they academic enough? Whatever that means! (Self-report, November 15, 2006)

Obviously, the students seem to be going through many questions. Some of these questions relate to the standard of academic oral presentations their teacher has discussed in class. Other questions relate to the students' own interpretation of their teacher's belief. More elaboration on this issue will be dealt with in research question 2.

### **Stage 3: Rehearsing stage**

In this stage, students attempt to practice for the presentation. It seems that rehearsing should be easy for students because rehearsing means practicing many times. However, students find that they need to make decisions also in this stage. The decision the students need to make in this stage is whether they should write just keywords for the presentation or write out the whole script. Either decision has its benefit. For many students, writing and memorizing can make the students feel more prepared. However, the students run the risk of sounding unnatural. On the other hand, writing just the keyword can mean forgetting about what to say. Again, students express frustration in this stage. The following interviews will demonstrate this complex feeling of insecurity.

I am used to writing out everything. But, last time I did it, I sounded terrible when I saw the video again. So, when I prepared for my second presentation, I wrote just the keywords. I was so nervous that I couldn't remember what I wanted to say. I was so embarrassed. I don't know what I should do for my next presentation. I am so scared. (Interview, November 05, 2006)

I think it's too embarrassing to forget lines. That happened to my classmate. My classmate looked so afraid when she forgot what to say. I don't want that to happen to me. So I will memorize everything. I will write down everything. Also, my teacher said sometimes she

cannot understand my pronunciation, so I think I can be better if I memorize. (Interview, November 01, 2006)

#### **Stage 4: Presenting**

This is the final stage in which students present what they have worked hard for. However, this stage also involves some decision making for the students. These decisions tend to require instant answers. For example, during one presentation, one student had to make a decision regarding the rate of his speech. In another situation, one presenter had to add an unprepared example to his presentation when the teacher stopped him to ask a question. The students report that they find it difficult to ignore the reaction or the questions of the audience. The following self-report will demonstrate the nature of this type of decision.

I was so shocked when my teacher asked me to explain more. I was so nervous. At first, I didn't know how to react. I thought I was quite clear but when she asked that question, I didn't know what she didn't understand. So I gave her another example quickly. I didn't prepare for that example. That example just came because I read it yesterday. I was lucky that my teacher seemed happy with my answer. I really hate presenting. (Self-report, October 11, 2006)

To summarize, based on the observation of students' presentations in class, students' self-reports, and interviews, making an academic oral presentation seems to be a complex process which involves many different types of decision making. From the different decisions to be made, it can be realized that students find that making an academic oral presentation means considering many factors. These factors do not necessarily relate to one another neatly. Rather, the dynamic relationship among the factors is only partly reflected in the data presented.

#### **Theories and Beliefs about Making Academic Oral Presentations**

In order to capture more fully the factors that may influence students' interpretation of what an academic oral presentation is, it is important to examine the students' and their teacher's views of what makes an academic oral presentation. Again, the finding in this question suggests that the students and the teacher have very different views regarding the making of an academic oral presentation. These views may seem conflicting at times. The finding for this question comes mostly from interview data with the students, course instructor, and research supervisor.

##### **1. Definition of academic oral presentation**

It seems that students' find their teacher's explanation of academic oral presentation very difficult to understand. Students reported that they had experiences in making informative or persuasive speeches about a familiar topic. However, when engaging in oral speeches in this class, students find it difficult to grasp the notion of the term "academic". Some understood the word "academic" to mean "using technical words". Some believe that the word "academic" mean

sounding “official”.

My teacher always talked about “academic” but I really don’t know what the word is. I mean I know the meaning of the word “academic” but I don’t really know what my teacher wants in class. (Interview, December 2, 2006)

I think academic presentation just means that you have to use difficult theories and words to describe something you want to talk about. I think that is hard because I have very few vocabulary. (Interview, December 8, 2006)

Academic presentation means I have to give a formal talk. I cannot use everyday words. I cannot use idioms. (Interview, December 22, 2006)

On the other hand, the course instructor believes that the term “academic” refers to the ability to synthesize ideas from different articles. In other words, the course instructor invites students to integrate ideas they read from different articles. To the instructor, the ability to use students’ own analytical ability in integrating articles is how academic presentation differs from other type of presentations.

My students tend to summarize only the articles they have read. But, I want to hear what they think of the articles. I don’t mean whether they like the articles or not. Rather, I want to know whether the students can really discuss not summarize what they have read. To me, this ability is an academic ability. (Interview, December 20, 2006)

My definition of the term “academic” means knowing about the norm and the standard of the certain field. I mean if the student is in the TESOL track, then he should be able to discuss the important theories in this area and how these theories are important to his studies. But, I think this concept is very difficult to understand. (Interview, December 28, 2006)

It seems that from the different interviews, students have very different views of what “academic” means from the instructor and the research advisor. The mismatch in the beliefs can be used to explain why students find making an academic presentation so difficult.

## **2. Expectation**

Another mismatch in the belief between the course instructor and the students lies in the expectation of the goal of an academic oral presentation. To students, following the teacher’s guideline by including all the essential elements of an academic presentation is the goal to achieve. However, the teacher believes that the students have not truly understood the meaning of each of the elements in the academic presentation.

I included all the parts. I talked about my literature review. I talked about all my articles. I talked about my methodology. I talked about my findings and my implications. I still get a low mark. I really don’t know what else I can include. (Interview, December 23, 2006)

I know that my students have included all the important sections of a piece of academic research. But many of them do not understand the relationship among each of the sections. I mean, for

example, the goal of the literature review is to identify a research space. That is, after students' review of literature, I should know clearly what has not been done in the chosen area. I also need to know how my student's research will contribute to the understanding of the chosen area. But, I rarely find the answer in my student's discussion of their literature review. (Interview, December 29, 2006)

The mismatch in the belief regarding the expectation of the goal of an academic presentation may also help to explain why students find it frustrating to select articles they need to talk about in their presentation. As students do not clearly understand the goal of a literature review, knowing what to talk about during the presentation naturally becomes a difficult decision for the students.

### **3. Providing specific examples**

A mismatch in the understanding of providing specific example between the students and the course instructor also lead to frustration felt by the students during their presentations. Students find it difficult to understand when the teacher always comments on the fact that more specific example needs to be provided. On the other hand, the teacher finds it quite frustrating why students do not understand that providing a specific example means providing something concrete not hypothetical. The following example from the interviews of the student and the course instructor can explain this mismatch clearly.

I don't understand why my teacher can't see my example. I mean I explained already that task-based learning has many benefits. If students can engage in tasks, they can learn to combine many skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. Students would prefer task-based learning and not teacher centered. Isn't my example clear? (Interview, November 23, 2006)

Students tend to think that "if" statements are good enough as examples to illustrate their points. When my student talked about the benefit of task-based learning, I want to hear specific research finding that suggests the benefit of task-based learning. I expect my students to tell me that according to research, task-based learning provide more opportunities for interaction. Research also suggests that interaction leads to learning of a second language. But, students don't get the meaning of "being specific". I want actual data. Even personal example will be better than "if" statements. (Interview, December 18, 2006)

To summarize, there are different beliefs regarding the meaning of an academic oral presentation to the students, the course instructors, and the research advisors. These differences in the beliefs may lead to different interpretations of making an academic oral presentation. For example, the whole concept of "academic" does not seem to have a common understanding between the student and the teacher. As such, it may be quite difficult for students to ever reach the goal of making an academic presentation. These differing beliefs may help to explain why the making of an academic presentation may be quite a complex process which involves many

decisions.

### Conclusion

The findings in this study suggest that making academic oral presentations is not an easy task for Taiwanese graduate students in the TESOL field. Although many of the students' English is quite proficient in their field of study, reporting about their own study to a group of audience has been shown to be difficult. One practical implication of this study is that teachers should become aware of the source of difficulty for students. In other words, as students present their study, teachers can help provide specific goals for students to achieve at each stage so that when students have to make decisions about what to include for their presentation, they will not be so confused. For students, being aware of the goals of the teachers and the academic norm of the specific field will be critical as students try to master their academic competency in their field.

On a theoretical level, the use of the socio-cultural perspective allows this study to examine the process of making academic oral presentation in depth. That is, cultural and contextual factors have been considered as a part of the process of making academic oral presentations. The dynamic nature of the academic oral presentation and the complexity involved in the learning process has been investigated fully.

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