# The Conceptualization of Oral Presentations in Higher Education as Multimodal: Why, How and What

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## Abstract

Oral presentation skill is a core competency in higher education and employment but tertiary Malaysian students have been reported to struggle with this important communication skill. This practical issue is complicated by the fact that requirements of delivering oral presentations in the 21$^{st}$ century are becoming more and more multimodal. Therefore, playing the dual roles of a researcher and an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teacher with predominantly Malaysian Chinese students, I aspire to develop a pedagogical initiative that is aimed at enhancing the learning of multimodal oral presentation skills among Malaysian Chinese higher education students in the basic oral presentation skills course. Being part of a larger postgraduate study, this paper discusses an important premise of this pedagogical initiative - that oral presentation skills required at the higher education level should be conceptualized as multimodal. The implications of this conceptualization point to the need to redesign and reimagine the pedagogical method utilized to teach oral presentation skills in the 21$^{st}$ century. With reference to the title of this paper, the conclusion of this paper would revisit the *why*, *how* and *what* of conceptualizing oral presentation skills as multimodal.

**Key words:** EAP, ESP, higher education, Malaysian students, multimodal, oral presentation skills, pedagogy

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# Introduction

Oral presentation skill is undeniably valuable in higher education. Oral presentation skills are engaged for the delivery of oral monologues, which are essentially "academic presentations, dissertation and thesis proposals, or any event where someone has to speak for a given length of time on a topic without interruption" (Barrett and Liu, 2016: 4). To succeed in higher education, oral academic presentation is a central activity in all courses (Kibler, Salerno and Palacios, 2014; Rahman *et al.*, 2008; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Therefore, at the higher education level, there is a need to extend conversational oral skills to develop oral skills for academic pursuits (Garbati and Mady, 2015). In Malaysia, it is often the responsibilities of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in universities to develop students' abilities in oral presentations (Kaur and Sidhu, 2007; Rahman *et al.*, 2008). Likewise, at the global level, English language teaching within EAP and ESP courses addresses the specific language skills needed by non-native speakers to deliver a presentation in academia (Barrett and Liu, 2016).

Oral presentation skills are also critical for employment but Malaysian tertiary students have been reported to struggle with this skill. Numerous surveys have highlighted that Malaysian graduates are incompetent in oral presentation skills that are required for employment (see Kassim and Ali, 2010; Nair *et al.*, 2012; Singh *et al.*, 2014; Talif and Noor, 2009; Williams and Yah, 2013; Wye and Lim, 2009). The industries that require at least adequate oral presentation skills are quite diverse, ranging from engineering (Bhattacharrya, 2011), to accounting (Kerby and Romine, 2009) and business (De Grez *et al.*, 2009). In response to the reported lack in Malaysian students, stakeholders such as the government and researchers have urged educators to respond to the issue. For instance, the *National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017* (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012) has advocated for problems in curriculum and pedagogy to be addressed by educators to improve the oral skills of Malaysian graduates. In addition, it has been emphasized that training of effective oral presentation skills in academic settings has to become an "integral" part of an education program that prepares undergraduates for the workplace (Mohd. Radzuan and Kaur, 2011). This is in line with the *Malaysia Education Blueprint of 2015-2025*, which aspires to produce holistic and balanced graduates by transforming higher education.

# The Need for Multimodal Conceptualization

Although oral presentation is not a novel area of research, a pedagogical intervention is more than necessary since Malaysian tertiary students are still found to be inadequate in a skill that is so highly regarded in academia and for employment. This practical predicament of such a valuable skill is complicated by the demands of the communication landscape in the 21st century that is increasingly multimodal. According to the Multiliteracies argument,

new communication technologies have made meaning-making "increasingly multimodal - in which written-linguistic modes of meaning interface with oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning" (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015: 3). To develop an oral presentation in the current century, students need to manipulate diverse communicative modes (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009 and 2015; Kress, 2010). For example, past discourse studies on oral presentations at the higher education level indicate that oral presentations require a range of skills that are not limited to oral skills. Januin and Stephen (2015) discovered that EAP class presentations require voice projection, making eye contact, engaging body gestures, using visual aids, the appropriate presentation structure and linguistic knowledge. A study on Japanese undergraduates in Canada indicated that students utilized PowerPoint and second language written texts to prepare for their presentations (Kobayashi, 2003). Another study that made observations on student deliveries of oral presentations suggested that students manipulated their rate of speaking and engaged visuals and gestures to maintain audience attention (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). In particular, the pedagogical problem that needs to be addressed is that the students are required to engage multimodal literacies, but they are not taught effectively to do so in the classroom (Hung, Chiu and Yeh, 2013). Hence, for pedagogy to be targeted at the relevant skills, there is a need to systematically identify the specific skills of oral presentations delivered at the higher education level in the 21st century.

In the Malaysian higher education context, there have been no top-down guidelines to implement any pedagogical intervention for oral skills (Singh, Thambusamy and Ramly, 2014). The problem of lack of guidelines is compounded by the fact that there is hardly any research done in the Malaysian context on pedagogical interventions that focus on oral presentation skills. The few studies that have been identified to explore pedagogical interventions mostly do not target oral presentation skills but focus on oral interaction skills instead (see Nadzrah *et. al.*, 2013; Ting *et al.*, 2010; Williams and Yah, 2013). The limited numbers of studies that investigate oral presentation skills at the Malaysian higher education level suggest that there are limitations that successive research needs to overcome. For instance, a systematic pedagogical intervention is yet to be proposed (see Ainon *et al.*, 2013) and critical skills required of oral presentations such as content development, organization, grammar and pronunciation are overlooked (Kassim *et al.*, 2015).

In response to the perceived pedagogical gap in addressing multimodal skills in oral presentations especially in the Malaysian context, as an EAP/ESP teacher with predominantly Malaysian Chinese students and a researcher, I aspire to develop a pedagogical initiative that is aimed at enhancing the learning of multimodal oral presentation skills among Malaysian higher education students in the basic oral presentation skills course. The students in my context of study have undergone the Mandarin national-type primary school system in Malaysia which uses Mandarin as the medium of instruction and the Malaysian national secondary school system which uses Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. Their multilingual language

profile is similar to the average Malaysian Chinese student, who would have mastered some Mandarin, Malay and English, in addition to speaking one or more Chinese dialects (Ting, 2013) by the time they enrolled in tertiary education.

Being part of a larger postgraduate study, the scope of this paper however, is focused on clarifying two pertinent issues before a pedagogical initiative that is applicable in the Malaysian tertiary classroom could be suggested. In the next section, I would explain the process of identifying the multimodal oral presentation skills that should be developed in EAP and ESP courses at the basic level in Malaysian higher education. Then, I would describe the components of the multimodal oral presentation skills that should be developed in higher education. The implications of conceptualizing oral presentation skills as multimodal for the pedagogical scene in Malaysian higher education would be discussed before the conclusion is presented.

### How to Identify the Components of Multimodal Oral Presentation Skills

Since the present study addresses the multimodal oral presentation skills that should be taught by the EAP/ESP teacher in the basic course at the higher education level, the process of identifying the components of multimodal oral presentation skills focuses on the informative speech. This is because persuasive speech has been highlighted to be more challenging than informative speech (Quagliata, 2014).

The initial list of components was amalgamated from two textbooks (Lucas, 2007; Sidhu, 2006), two samples of assessment rubrics from institutions of higher learning in Malaysia and two empirical studies (such as Chou, 2011; De Grez *et al.*, 2009). Subsequently the final list of components was confirmed based on feedback from two experts with about 10 years of experience in teaching oral presentation skills at the Malaysian tertiary level and a Malaysian Chinese industrial representative whose daily job routine includes delivering and listening to numerous presentations.

Textbooks are a fundamental aspect of the basic course for oral presentation skills (Morreale *et al.*, 2006). The textbook written by Stephen Lucas is recognized as the most widely used textbook in the basic course in the United States of America (Morreale *et al.*, 2006). Based on my experience as an EAP/ESP teacher, this is a popular reference for oral presentation skills in EAP courses in Malaysian universities and colleges due to its credibility. The assessment criteria for informative speech proposed by Lucas (2007: 372) fall into three major sub-groups: content, delivery and language. The content criterion includes introduction, preview of points, organization, support, visual aids, transitions, summary and concluding remarks. The delivery criterion includes eye contact, voice, rate of speech, body language and time. Finally, the language criterion includes grammar and choice of words.

A textbook published by a Malaysian academic was consulted to gain insights on skills that are valued by a Malaysian expert. The rubrics for informative speech provided by Sidhu (2006) assess oral presentation skills based on three major groups of skills in a very similar manner to

Lucas (2007). The delivery criterion includes eye contact, volume, rate of speech, body language and adherence to time. The content criterion includes attention-getting opener, preview of points, organization, supporting ideas, visual aids, transitions, summary and concluding remarks. The grammar criterion includes grammar and choice of words (Sidhu, 2006: 89-93).

A set of assessment rubrics used to assess undergraduates in a Malaysian public university in the beginning of their degree year showed the same skills being evaluated as Lucas (2007) and Sidhu (2006), except for the additional criterion of pronunciation. Another set of rubrics used to assess diploma level Business and Mass Communication students in a Malaysian private university had a less exhaustive list of criteria. The assessed criteria were support, conclusion and grasp of knowledge under the content criterion; in addition to eye contact, voice, pronunciation, body language and visual aids under the delivery criterion. The provision of handouts was expected for visual aids and the language criterion included spelling.

Furthermore, the components of multimodal oral presentation skills were decided through reference to assessment rubrics shared by relevant international studies. An introductory course in Belgium highlighted nine assessment criteria: introduction, structure, conclusion under content-related criteria; body language, audience contact, enthusiasm, eye-contact, vocal delivery under delivery criteria; and general quality criterion (De Grez *et al*., 2009: 115). The assessment criteria in an EAP subject for EFL undergraduates in Taiwan included organization, content knowledge, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar (Chou, 2011: 284). Organization comprised a well-structured introduction, body and conclusion, which were linked by transitional signals. Content knowledge should be expressed with relevant examples. Fluency should be similar to natural speech, and pronunciation was expected to be clear, standard and of an appropriate rhythm. Vocabulary and grammar were expected to be correct and comprehensible.

After carefully studying two textbooks (Lucas, 2007; Sidhu, 2006), two samples of assessment rubrics from institutions of higher learning in Malaysia and two empirical studies (Chou, 2011; De Grez *et al*., 2009), the initial list of the components of multimodal oral presentation skills used in this study are introduction, content, organization, conclusion, linguistic, oral, visual and gestural. Table 1 summarizes the components oral presentation skills highlighted by the selected sources. However, feedback from two experienced Malaysian lecturers and a Malaysian Chinese industrial representative recommends the inclusion of overall credibility and coordination to the list of components.

In summary, the components of multimodal oral presentation skills were decided based on document analysis of rubrics shared by selected textbooks, Malaysian tertiary institutions and past studies and validated by three Malaysian experts. Figure 1 illustrates the process.

Table 1. Components of Multimodal Oral Presentation Skills from a Sample of Sources

| Skills | Sources | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Textbooks | | Samples from International Studies | | Samples from Malaysian Institutions of Higher Education | |
| | Lucas (2007) | Sidhu (2006) | De Grez et al. (2009) | Chou (2011) | A Malaysian Public University | A Malaysian Private University |
| Introduction | / | / | / | / | / | - |
| Organization | / | / | / | / | / | / |
| Support | / | / | - | / | / | / |
| Conclusion | / | / | / | / | / | - |
| Grammar | / | / | - | / | / | - |
| Word choice | / | / | - | / | / | - |
| Transitions | / | / | - | / | / | - |
| Eye contact | / | / | / | - | / | / |
| Voice | / | / | / | - | / | / |
| Rhythm | / | / | / | / | / | - |
| Pronunciation | / | - | - | / | / | / |
| Body language | / | / | / | - | / | / |
| Visual aids | / | - | - | - | / | / |
| Audience interaction | - | - | / | - | - | - |
| Time | / | / | - | - | / | - |

Sources: Lucas, 2007; Sidhu, 2006; Chou, 2011; De Grez et al., 2009
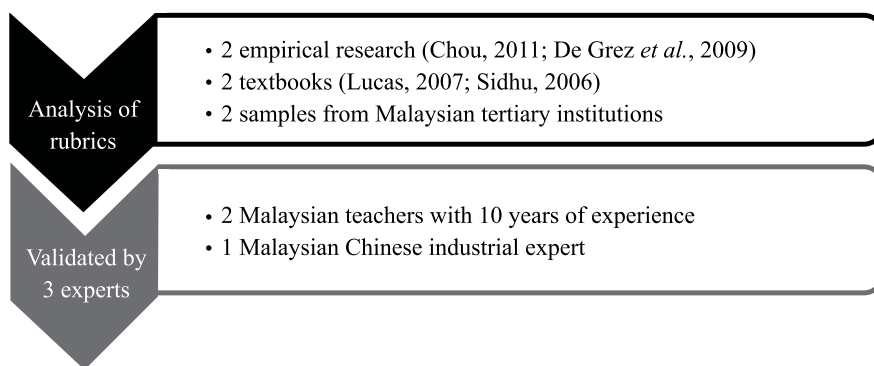


Figure 1. The Process of Identifying and Validating the Components of Multimodal Oral Presentation Skills

# The Components of Multimodal Oral Presentation Skills for Group Presentations

I have focused on identifying and describing components of oral presentation skills that relate to group presentations because it has been suggested that the first oral presentation delivered at the higher education level should be delivered in pairs or groups (Zappa-Hollman, 2007) and group presentations are an integral part of university and future work experiences (Barry, 2012). Ten components of multimodal oral presentation skills have been identified for delivering informative speeches in groups at the Malaysian tertiary level. These ten components were further classified under three sub-categories: content and structure, delivery and team dynamics. Under content and structure, the components are introduction, content, organization and conclusion. Delivery includes components such as linguistic, oral, visual, gestural, and overall credibility. Lastly, team dynamics refers to coordination. Table 2 depicts the specific components and descriptions of oral presentation skills that should be pedagogically addressed.

Table 2. Multimodal Oral Presentation Skills for Group Presentations:
Components and Descriptions

| Components | Descriptions of excellent abilities in the components |
| --- | --- |
| Content and Structure | |
| Introduction | Speaker successfully uses creative techniques to *gain attention and interest*. *Introduction of topic* is complete, clear and interesting. *Credibility* is established strongly. Body of speech is *previewed* clearly. |
| Content | Topic is very *suitable* for audience. *Specific purpose and main points* are identified clearly and achieved purposefully. Main points are *supported* with appropriate, credible and engaging content. |
| Organization | Clear distinctions of *introduction, body and conclusion*. *Organization* pattern enhances the understanding of content. *Connectives* are consistently used to achieve smooth and purposeful organization. |
| Conclusion | Speaker *reinforces* central idea memorably and creatively. Speaker *relates* central idea to audience convincingly. |
| Team dynamics | |
| Coordination | Effective *time management*. Member-to-member *transitions* are effective and smooth. |
| Delivery | |
| Linguistic ability | *Grammar* is consistently accurate. *Vocabulary* is consistently appropriate. Effective *transition signals/signposts*. |
| Oral ability | Loud and clear *voice*. Clear *articulation* throughout presentation. Evidently strategic and effective *pauses and emphasis*. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Visual ability | *Creative* and *appropriate* use of visual aids to support content. |
| | *Clearly and purposefully explain* visual aids. |
| Gestural ability | Maintain *eye contact* with the entire audience throughout presentation. |
| | Confident *posture*. |
| | Effectively use *physical actions*. |
| Overall credibility | Expert *familiarity with content*. |
| | Express unquestionable *conviction and confidence*. |
| | Maintain *audience* attention through delivery. |
| | *Grooming* enhances credibility. |

Sources: Zappa-Hollman (2007) and Barry (2012).

## Implications

Thus far, the practical and pedagogical rationales for conceptualizing oral presentation skills as multimodal, the process of identifying the components of multimodal oral presentation skills and the list of components have been delineated. Conceptualizing oral presentation skills as multimodal implies that a relevant and effective pedagogical method would need to focus on skills beyond the oral and linguistic. The pedagogical method for multimodal oral presentation skills needs to be different from the methods recommended for other speaking tasks such as the monologic speaking task compulsory in TOEFL iBT listed by Iwashita *et al.* (2008) and interactional speech highlighted by Thornbury (2012). A systematic literature review completed by Barrett and Liu (2016) affirmed that to date, there is no theoretically backed instructional approach that addresses the multimodal features of oral presentations.

The problem with established methods such as Audiolingualism and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is that these methods do not target the multimodal skills required of oral presentations at higher education. Audiolingualism puts so much emphasis on phonological and structural features (Celce-Murcia, 2014; Larsen-Freeman, 2000) that the other skills required in oral presentations such as visual design and content development are neglected. Another method, CLT, is recognized for developing numerous techniques to improve oral fluency (Hughes, 2011; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Thornbury, 2012), but does not address the various skills required of oral presentation skills sufficiently because CLT is primarily based on linguistic conventions instead of multimodality (Allen and Paesani, 2010).

Attempting a systematic identification and specific description of the components of multimodal oral presentation skills is only the first step toward designing a pedagogical method that is both relevant and effective for the Malaysian Chinese students in my classroom. Being part of a larger study, future articles would elaborate more on the appropriate pedagogical method and classroom activities that would address these multimodal oral presentation skills.

# Conclusion

To conclude, I would organize the discussion in terms of the three questions stated in the title. 1) Why is there a need to conceptualize (or re-conceptualize) oral presentation skills as multimodal? Oral presentation skills are critical for academia and employment, and recent research, especially in the discipline of discourse studies and the Multiliteracies framework (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009 and 2015), has made observations that inspired this conceptualization. 2) How can we identify the multimodal oral presentations skills that are required? This paper suggests that document analysis and validation by Malaysian experts can help to identify these skills. 3) What exactly are the components of multimodal oral presentation skills required in higher education? The components include 10 skills under the sub-categories of content and structure, delivery and team dynamics. Implications of conceptualizing oral presentation skills as multimodal suggest that academics need to design an alternative pedagogical method that addresses the range of skills required to deliver an effective presentation in Malaysian higher education today. Without a relevant and effective pedagogical method that addresses the multimodal oral presentation skills required in academia and for employment today, the abilities of Malaysian higher education students in oral presentation skills would always be a point of conflict. It is precisely the description of this alternative pedagogical method that would attempted in the next published paper.

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