

Research Article

THE PERCEPTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES OF SECOND-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENTS AT CANTHO UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE AND PHARMACY, VIETNAM IN MARKING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES PRESENTATIONS

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Thai Cong Dan^{1*} Nguyen Thi Tuyet Minh² and Au Xuan Sam³

¹Can Tho University, Vietnam

^{2,3}Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Vietnam

*Corresponding Author, E-mail: tcdan@ctu.edu.vn

Abstract

One of the demanding tasks for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes at Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy (CTUMP) is making a presentation. This paper aimed to examine students' perceptions of towards making ESP presentation and find out difficulties that they might encounter in making ESP presentation. And for the methodology, the cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out with 540 second-year students. The data were collected by the use of questionnaire. The findings revealed 72.1% students' positive perceptions towards making ESP presentation as well as significant problems including a lot of ESP vocabulary in materials for presentations, difficulties in memorizing the presentation contents, lack of confidence, self-study and teamwork skills and other problems related to facilities.

Keywords: ESP, Presentations, Difficulties, Perceptions, Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy (CTUMP)

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be simply described as the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. More precisely, it is described as the teaching of English used in academic studies or the teaching of English for vocational or professional purposes. Learners of ESP are oriented with the conception and preference for communicative competence. The methodology used and

the activities of the discipline designed are focused on the language appropriate to these activities (Gatehouse, 2001).

One of the most popular methods in ESP learning and teaching is making a presentation, a kind of speaking activity in which learners prepare a talk and speak on either a given topic or on the topic of their own choice.

This activity has been carried out widely at ESP classes in CTUMP. However, it might possibly be a demanding task for some students because, as they stated, exposing linguistic weaknesses to others easily leads to anxiety (Arnold, 2003; Kavaliauskien, 2004). Besides having to overcome their fear of making public talk, students are required to work a lot on organizing the presentation material, developing ideas and selecting the main points to deliver information effectively, managing presentation notes, working with visual aids and making use of skills to connect with audiences and deal with questions. This method has inevitably posed enormous challenges for both teachers and students. We still wonder students' perceptions towards this activity as well as its effectiveness.

So far, there have been a few investigations made into the perceptions and difficulties of students in making ESP presentations (Carmody, 1998). With regard to CTUMP's setting, we carried out the present study to assess the perceptions of students at CTUMP towards the method and the difficulties those students might encounter in making ESP presentations.

Literature Review

CTUMP students are non-English major; therefore, making a presentation in a foreign language context is definitely not easy. Especially, weak students' self-images become more vulnerable when they are invited to speak to each other and express their ideas. As many researchers have pointed out, the skill producing most anxiety is speaking (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). This anxiety comes in part from a lack of confidence in our general linguistic knowledge, the embarrassment suffered from exposing our language imperfections in front of others, the fear of negative affective feedback from the teachers or aggressive or unfriendly listeners, which sure influence fluency in speaking in a negative manner (Arnold, 2003).

Kavaliauskien (2002) had the same idea. In his paper on learners' attitudes to speaking in public and perceptions of experienced gains and lacks, he found out each learner encounters various difficulties in making presentations. He stated that the lack of confidence, fear of looking foolish, unfamiliar situation, sense of isolation and self-consciousness cause speakers anxiety. Students are also concerned about such things as grammar, lexis, and pronunciation. Especially, he emphasized the psychological aspect of

language learning: the fear of mistakes and another main reason for anxiety in public speaking appear to be fear of the consequences, i.e. be judged by others.

Furthermore, as wealth of publications on the issues of making presentations and how to prepare a presentable talk and deliver it confirmed, making well-organized presentations in front of an audience takes a lot of practice. It is because speaking involves two types of skills basic, lower level motor-perceptive skills of producing right sounds and using accurate grammatical structures, and communicative strategies such as what and how to get the meaning across (Kavaliauskien, 2005).

In a study about aspects of learning ESP at university, Kavaliauskien (2002) mentioned about another difficulty, namely the lack of ESP vocabulary by giving an example of the ESP course introducing learners to English for economics, i.e. the kind of language they will face in their future profession. Learners have to master terms used in economics, to be able to understand formal professional texts and authentic recordings of lectures and produce formal pieces in writing as well as to be able to make professional presentations and participate in discussions on contemporary economic issues. Besides the lack of ESP vocabulary, he found out ESP reading is not considered easy to almost two thirds of learners. Students do not seem to have been taught the reading sub-skills like skimming and scanning and prefer to translate ESP passages word for word. Such an approach does reading slow and boring. The flaws in reading skills are easy for learners to conceal, because learners do all the reading as home assignments, and the speed of reading has never been checked in class due to the shortage of time. It can be concluded that students find it very hard to cope with learning ESP basically because of lack of the General English skills.

As can be seen, making a presentation in English can be a difficult and demanding or even daunting task. The presenter needs certain skills which go beyond the range of ordinary language classrooms. As Kavaliauskien (2004) concluded, learners need some systematic training in preparing and performing its different elements – from planning and introducing a topic to concluding and handling questions. To learn how to make clear and well-organized presentations in front of an audience, even if the audience are own classmates, and to overcome a fear of speaking in public takes a lot of practice.

Methods

Subjects

The questionnaires were delivered 560 second-year students. They were all male and female students from 8 medical classes at CTUMP and the range age was 19-21. However, some of them were not present on the days when the survey was carried out as expected. In addition, a few notes were

excluded because of some blank spaces. So, the number of participants decreased and only 540 students (300 male students and 240 female students) were selected as the sample of the study.

Research method

This was a cross-sectional descriptive study. The statistical data about two main areas including students' perceptions towards making ESP presentations and their difficulties in making ESP presentations were collected by questionnaires.

The first version of the questionnaires was piloted with 50 second-year students at CTUMP in order to gain constructive feedback. Then, it was carefully revised to ensure its accuracy, conciseness, comprehensiveness, and focus. After that, the questionnaires were delivered to students directly in classes. Finally, the questionnaire data were analyzed by SPSS 22.0. Then, they were illustrated and systematized by graphs and charts.

Results and Discussions

Students' perceptions towards making ESP presentations

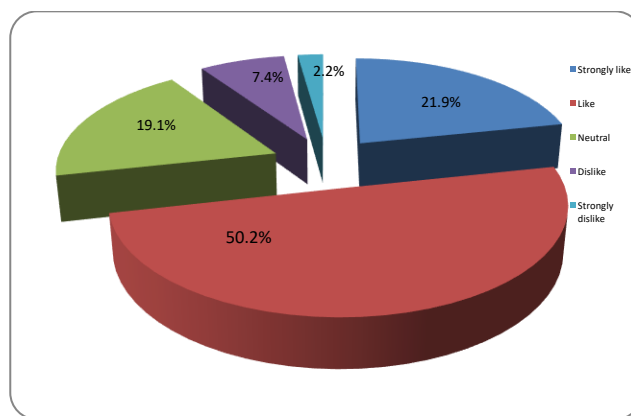


Figure 1 Students' perceptions towards making ESP presentations

Figure 1 demonstrated how views are divided up: 72.1% of the students liked making presentations in ESP lessons, 19.1% students had neutral feeling, and 9.6% students did not like it. The general overview of the data showed that the majority of students enjoyed this method.

Comparing the results to those identified in the studies carried out at Vietnam National University by Tong (2009) and at Mycolas Romeris University by Kavaliausien (2002), this rate is quite high, much higher than the percentage of students interested in making ESP presentation (about 50%) at College of Technology, Vietnam National University and students of Faculty of Social Science, Mycolas Romeris University. It can be concluded that the application of this activity in teaching and learning English

at Can Tho University of Medicine is quite successful. This result reinforces our arguments for the implementation of this teaching method at school.

Achievements through making ESP presentations

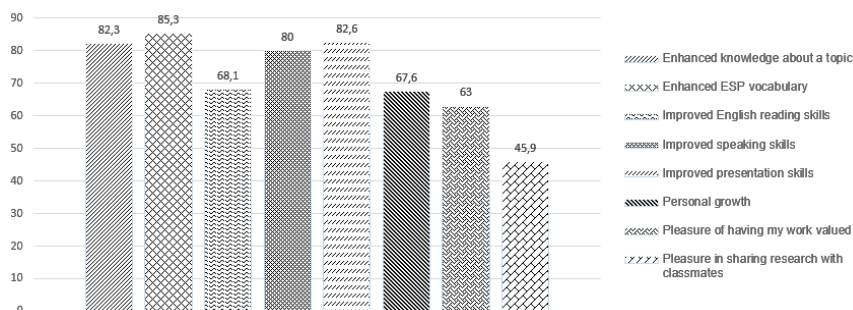


Figure 2 Students' perceptions of gains through making ESP presentations

Data in Figure 2 showed that most students had strong awareness of the benefits of ESP presentations. Most students recognized the benefits of this activity. It is worth noticing students increased their English vocabulary (85.3%), improved their presentation skills (82.6%), increased their knowledge about the topic they have been given to present (82.3%), improved speaking skills (80%) and reading skills (68.1%). 67.6% students had personal growth. 63% had pleasure of having their work valued and 45.9% felt happy to be able to share research with their classmates. All the most significant benefits perceived by the participants were related to enhanced knowledge and skills.

This finding was better than the data collected at Vietnam National University by Tong (2009) with only 40% students at College of Technology increasing their vocabulary, 58% improving their presentation skills, 49% increasing their knowledge of the presentation topic, 58% improving their speaking skills, and 31% improving their reading skills.

This survey also noted many of the students' ideas. Notably, students said that making an ESP presentation increased their motivation in learning and confidence in speaking in public. During the time preparing for the presentation, the students learned how to work in group, realized their shortcomings, learned much from their partners and help each other study better, and improved English speaking skills.

It could be concluded that CTUMP students showed positive perceptions towards making ESP presentation. As a result, it might somehow reflect their expectations about participating in this learning activity. This result also coincided with teachers expectations for increasing the knowledge and skills when applying this activity in ESP classes at Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy.

Students' difficulties in making ESP presentations

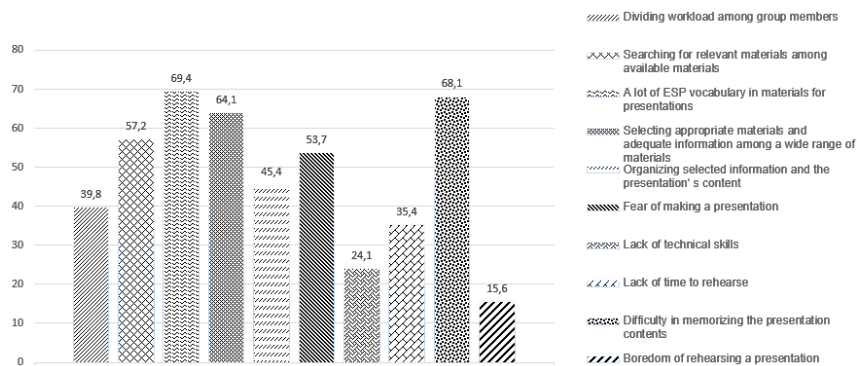


Figure 3 Students' difficulties in preparing the presentation contents

Students in Figure 3 encountered many problems of terminology in the materials (69.4%); difficulties to remember the presentation contents (68.1%) and select appropriate documentation (64.1%); searching for relevant materials among for presentation topics (57.2%); and other troublesome problems, namely fear of speaking to the crowd (53.7%); arranging ideas, information and presentation content (45%); division of work for team members (39.8%); lack of rehearsal time (35.4%); lack of technical skills (24.1%); boredom of rehearsing a presentation (15.6%). Two major difficulties involved in comprehending ESP vocabulary in materials and memorizing the presentation contents.

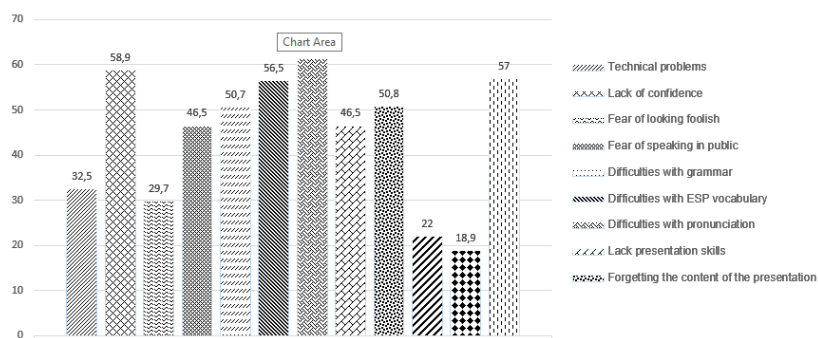


Figure 4 Students' difficulties in delivering presentations

The data shown in Figure 4 revealed that a large number of problems in delivering presentation. Difficulties involved in pronunciation (61.3%); lack of confidence (58.9%), anxiety about review questions asked after the presentation (57%), vocabulary (56.5%), memorizing the talk (50.8%), grammar (50.7%), presentation skills (46.5%); fear of speaking in public (46.5%), technical problems (32.5%), worrying about friends' assessment (29.7%), fear of teacher's comments (22%) and friends' comments (18.9%). The most

serious problems were difficulties with pronunciation, lack of confidence, and fear of questions to be asked after presentation.

The findings on many difficulties that students have to encounter when learning by these methods from the conducted surveys are to be discussed.

It should be emphasized that the problems faced by CTUMP students were similar to those identified at many other schools. Like other previous studies (Kavaliauskien, 2005; Tong, 2009), the findings about difficulties in making ESP presentation indicated that the main problems were searching for information, selecting information, using technical software, memorizing contents, lacking time to rehearse, fearing speaking in public, fearing looking foolish, and having difficulties with grammar and ESP vocabulary.

However, there were difference in the level of difficulties. In particular, at Vietnam National University, 50% of students complained about searching for relevant materials among available materials whereas at Can Tho University of Medicine, this number was 57.2%.

Three most troublesome problems that students of Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy encountered were too much ESP vocabulary in the materials for presentation topics, difficulties in remembering the presentation content and selecting materials for presentation. This rate was much higher than that of Vietnam National University, with 31%, 51% and 25%, respectively.

Students of Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy complained about technical problems when delivering a presentation (32.5%). They thought that the projector was too dim, the computers were infected with virus and operated slowly, which affected the quality of the presentation. Some students find PowerPoint software hard to use. This rate tripled the result found at the Vietnam National University (10%).

Like the findings in the study of Tong (2009), in this study, the findings also showed that students at CTUMP did not have the skills to work in groups. In particular, teammates were less cooperative and paid attention only to assigned tasks. Most of the group activities were superficial, focusing on creating products than collaboration in working. In addition, some students complained that their ideas were not always consistent with other group members' ones. The group members' academic strength was not at the same level. Group leaders were irresponsible. Moreover, some of the students did not participate in the rehearsal as well as did not contribute to the group as assigned. These students did not have experience in making English presentations, either.

CTUMP students met other hindrances not found in previous studies. Our research noted the difficulties involved in facilities. It was difficult to find places to rehearse the presentation. Students

had to find places like parks and cafes that were noisy and expensive. In addition, self-learning ability of students at CTUMP was weak. We noticed that the students “translate but not yet understand so do not remember the content presented”, “have not been taught in Vietnamese but must read in English so they feel difficult to understand”; “feel difficult to find reliable sources and websites”. Some interesting conclusions can be drawn, namely students do not know how to study available materials by themselves, spend too much time in choosing materials, do not know how to select information for their work, and lack ability to synthesize information for their presentation.

Conclusions

Seventy-two point two percent (72.1%) of students recognized the importance, meaning, and liked this activity.

The most troublesome problems in making an ESP presentation are too much ESP vocabulary in the materials, difficulties in memorizing the presentation contents, lack of confidence, and some other trouble related to the facilities, lack of skills for self-study as well as group work.

Suggestions

It is necessary to raise the awareness and improve skills about group work and self-study for each student, improve and modernise the facilities to meet the students’ needs as well as improve the quality of teaching and learning.

More in-depth research should be carried out with detailed surveys on the lecturers’ thinking about making ESP presentation.

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