

# IMPROVING ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS IN UNDERGRADUATES THROUGH CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM (AS A BI-PRODUCT OF SCAFFOLDING)

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**Abstract-** English is a global language at present and it is considered the key to knowledge, information, communication, technology, travel, trade and business (Turmapang, 2012). As there is a continuous rise in the unity of people in the globe, knowing one common language has become a necessity as a communication tool. As a result, in Sri Lanka, English is recognized as a key to employment opportunity and recognition in the society. Therefore, graduates from local state universities are expected to be equipped with the right knowledge, technical skills and most importantly communication skill competence and interactive skills in English. Further, to be employed in a well-paid, study- related job in the private sector, graduates are expected to be proficient in their communication and presentation skills in English language. However, it is significant that even though Sri Lankan students begin learning English as a subject from Grade 3 onwards (Gorden, Kuruppu&Kuruppu, 2015) and English is used as a medium of instruction in most of the courses at Sri Lankan universities, it has been identified that their English speaking confidence, performance and willingness to communicate remains inadequate as undergraduates. Thus, this research aims to find out a way to overcome speaking apprehension in undergraduates and enhance their oral confidence through constructive criticism as a means of scaffolding. This is used as a technique evolving from Bruner's Scaffolding Theory. A stratified sample of 39 Engineering undergraduates were subjected in this experimental research. A mixed approach was used. The positive impact brought out from constructive criticism provided to undergraduates as feedback is identified as an effective method to enhance oral confidence and presentation skills in English.

**Keywords-** Scaffolding, Constructive Criticism, Oral Presentations and Skills, EMI

## I. INTRODUCTION

English is considered as the language of trade, travel, business, technology and information in the present context. Having insufficient knowledge in English and communication, lessens one's chances of being recognized in society. In response to the great demand in the language, people have begun learning English as a second or a foreign language in Asia. Across Asia, the numbers of people having at least a functional command of the language has grown exceptionally over the last four decades (Bolton, 2008, p.3). Accordingly, the "current changes in the socio-linguistic realities of the region are often so rapid" and to keep up with the pace, one must be able to communicate in a global language which is understood by many in order to get along in society.

Perera (2010) and Gnanaseelan (2001) explicitly mention that the essentiality of English was realized by the local government not recently but many years back. Since the early 1950's, the successive governments in Sri Lanka, made it a point to teach English to all public schools in the country (Perera, 2010, P.7). English was made a compulsory second language to be taught in Sri Lankan schools, through the recommendation of the Special Committee on Education, 1943, with the aim of providing "English for all". According to Ministry of Education in 'Education First', even at the younger age of 7, when the students are in Grade three at school,

“Activity-Based Oral English (ABOE) is introduced through environment related activities. English words are used in day-to-day transactions. The idea is to ensure that children become familiar with English words early so that they will learn English better once it is introduced as a second language at Grade Three” (education first.lk,2013). The students in Sri Lankan schools continue learning English language as a compulsory subject until tertiary levels. Further, students in government schools are obliged to follow G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) and G.C.E. Advanced Level (A/L) General English’ as a common and compulsory subject. However, According to Gorden, Kuruppu and Kuruppu (2015) in the Sri Lankan context English language knowledge of the majority is ‘low’ even by the time they complete their A/L and enter university. Research further elaborates that Sri Lankan students show a low competency level in communicating in the language even though they pass both O/L and A/L English papers successfully (Wattegama, 2018).

It has been further highlighted by other scholars (Turnapang, 2012; Herscovitch, 2012; Bolton, 2008) who admit that a university degree in any subject is the main prerequisite for acquiring a job today, and together with that, by having sufficient fluency in English opens the doors to employment opportunities and financial rewards. The employment market in the present context is highly competitive, and therefore, to obtain a job in the discipline of preference, not only one must possess sound educational qualifications but one must also show exceptional skills and knowledge in English language to ensure a recognizable position.

## II. RESEARCH PROBLEM

In Sri Lanka, English is used as the medium of instruction for most of the courses in universities. As graduates, it is necessary that they possess the competence to communicate in their 2nd language as the interviews for the jobs are usually conducted in English. Feedback from local and international employers shows that verbal and written communication skills in English remain the most sought after attribute for prospective employees. (Sunday Star, 2011). Yamatet. al (2002) indicate in their work how English may directly affect one’s ability to communicate or express views, ideas and knowledge effectively. The study suggests that if the graduates are not competent in their productive skills, mainly speaking, they will be less competent communicators.

Undoubtedly, graduates must be fluent in their presentation skills, English speaking and public speaking skills as they enable graduates to function successfully in the future professional endeavours, and further in preparing them for their optimal academic career and to be employed in a high- paid, study related job (Živković, 2014). Whether they are expected to give presentations at conferences, symposia or other meetings, graduates must be equipped with the relevant skills. Having sufficient inter-active skills in English language is also a must in the present day. Most jobs are done with the international community and therefore, dealing with foreign or even local clients, require a sufficient fluency in the language. With the rise of globalization, graduates need to be proficient in oral skills to function in the professional and global setting. Oral presentation skills are essential for employability and true academic study as they lead students to enter into debate and sustained reasoning (Morley, 2006). Improving oral presentation skills is a chance for students to gain insight into knowledge and skills. “The mastery of the subject topic and the good will to interact with others will allow them to actually enjoy sharing their knowledge in a constructive way both for their audience and themselves with structured planning and organization” (p.469).

Even public speaking is realized as a necessary skill graduates should possess. It encourages students to voice their ideas, stand out for their points and express their opinions without being influenced by others. With the right public speaking skills, the graduates will be able to stand out in front of an audience and, make eye contact and engage them in conviction. To share knowledge with an audience, to persuade or educate the audience, having necessary public speaking skills is essential. It has also been found out how oral public speaking skills are the number one skill that college graduates found useful ((opn.lib.umn, 2018).

However, Public speaking is recognized as one of the most terrifying activities for majority of the students. According to a study conducted in University of Pittsburg, (2007) it reveals that “public speaking is many people’s greatest fear” (para 1). It further states that “some of the most common symptoms of speech anxiety are: shaking, sweating, butterflies in the stomach, dry mouth, rapid heartbeat, and squeaky voice” (para 1).

As undergraduates will soon be entering the employment market, it is necessary to find solutions for this problem

of speaking anxiety. In fact, English is used as the medium of instruction at university level, solutions must be taken at undergraduate level. Even though it is not possible to overcome all of this, there are ways which are suggested by this present study to make it work to the speaker's advantage. Students consider public speaking as the most difficult factor among the four language skills; because it is believed that speaking needs strong volition and self-confidence, that speaking and communicating with people is a tough task. If the motivation to speak in students is triggered, they will be confident. This research suggests how to offer constructive criticism to enhance the speaking confidence in students.

### III. OBSERVATIONS IN THE SRI LANKAN CONTEXT

In the Sri Lankan English classrooms, undergraduates show various traits of speaking anxiety when dealing with presentations. Be it group presentations such as poster and power point or individual presentations such as impromptu and prepared speeches, there are various physical characteristics and psychological issues which represent the oral anxiety in students. Most of these are caused due to undergraduates' inadequacy or ignorance of specific knowledge about the causal factors as well as speaking anxiety-avoiding techniques. On the other hand, they have not been pointed out their weak points individually. When dealing in the classroom, during oral presentations and group activities mainly, most incompetent students tend to rely on the more fluent students who would take up the challenging task of conducting oral presentations on behalf of the groups. As a result, the weaker students get neglected. Consequently, they tend to lag behind as they do not benefit from the speaking or presentation opportunities.

Nevertheless, there are some common presentation faux-pas that even the fluent students commit when conducting oral presentations in some instances. *Time management* is a major drawback in the students as they do not stick to the given time frame. Lack of practice is another main weakness in students as they do not concern much on practicing the presentation but spend plenty of time in preparations. This drawback can be witnessed in many ways by the teacher when the students are conducting the activity. Students commit this fault as they do not make it a point to practice the oral presentations before presenting it and as they are not aware of the variety of ways they can do this such as

by recording their voice, videoing and observing their weaknesses by themselves, practicing in front of the mirrors and getting the assistance of another to give support through feedback after observing their practices. However, only a handful students show adequate preparation when engaging in the final oral task presentations mainly as they have not been properly guided.

Not knowing how to impress the audience with the right dress code and imitating fake accents and pronunciation also lead to lack of interest in the audience.

In line with Pittsburg (2007), majority of the students display presentation anxiety in a variety of physical methods. These can be categorized into,

1) **Presentation contents**- Anxiety can be visible in the unorganized structure of one's presentation. Having no chronology in the presentation without a proper introduction to the subject matter, insufficient content where the student relies mainly on the displayed items on the slide show or the poster and rushed-in conclusion where the student is eager to finish the task, represents the communication nervousness in students.

Majority of the students display nervousness from the 'greeting' till the end of the presentation; through their forgetfulness in some contents, by reading the contents on the poster or on the screen of the power point and solely relying on the contents displayed for the audience, by not knowing how to answer the questions aimed at them at the end of the presentation as they have just read the contents prepared by a more fluent student in the groups (in group presentations), and by not using any facial expressions, hand gesture, body movement and eye contact.

2) **Voice**- When a student has no audibility, there is no vocal variety with no fluctuations in the voice with multiple gap fillers such as 'hmm' and 'ah' sound or long pauses and stuttering and when a student relates the whole presentation in a monotonous tone, it not only disengages the listener but reduces interest in the speech.

Not knowing that by using repeated phrases, lowering, increasing the tone of voice and pausing at times help to maintain interest in the audience is the main problem faced by undergraduates.

3) **Gestures-** This has 4 main elements; **eye contact, hand gestures, facial expressions, and body movement.** Not knowing how to appropriately use these, students often find it hard to keep the attention of the audience at them during oral presentations. The students use them from time to time. However, these are rarely adapted by the students when engaging in presentations due to their anxiety in oral presentations. Therefore, during constructive criticism the teacher will provide necessary and appropriate techniques to follow during a speech when using gestures.

- a) Using correct **eye contact** during the speech and having focal points is necessary to engage the audience and to get the attention. If one fails to follow this technique, the speech often turns dull and uninteresting to the others.
- b) **Facial expressions** play an important role during oral presentations as it is the first sight that the audience is exposed to in a speaker. Starting as well as ending a presentation with a smile is of utmost importance at any level. It is also necessary to adjust facial expressions according to the contents of the speech.
- c) **Appropriate hand gestures** during a speech is highly essential. However, majority of students are not aware of this and use hands in inappropriate ways in most cases. They swing and fold arms, clutch or put the hands in the pockets or even at times scratch their face, head or adjust their hair, cloths or belt. These observations can be frequently be made as they are unaware of using 'personal space' freely when expressing their opinions in the speeches with their hands.
- d) **Correct body movement** is a way to grab the attention of the audience. Moving on the stage in an appropriate manner helps to keep the audiences' eyes move towards the speaker's direction. This helps them draw away from falling asleep and being uninterested. However, most of the students are reluctant to use the stage as they conduct oral presentations as they tend to rely on the podium by leaning towards it, or takes comfort in leaning on to a wall, chair or table nearby (in the class).At often times, they stand on one spot instead.

Moving from one leg to the other can also be observed in some students. Minority of the

students have the courage to move on the stage or even approach the audience when necessary during the presentations.

4) **Insufficient hooks-** Hooks are methods which can be incorporated into a speech or a presentation to make it more meaningful, interesting and entertaining. There are various hooks which are introduced to the speakers during the teaching sessions here such as audio, visual aids (video/ audio clips, ppp), props, quotations, asking questions, dialogues, narratives, share experiences, using humour and engaging the audience in presentations is a major drawback which leads to lack of interest and make the audience withdraw from the presentations.

Not knowing how to use these 'hooks' appropriately, the presenters fail to keep the audience alert and win their attention. During presentations 'the audience' is the main goal and to educate, entertain or inform them is the main aim.

Therefore, during the research, the teacher will provide constructive criticism on the above to individuals. Their strong and weak points in the presentation will be pointed out while tips will be offered to improve their existing speaking skills or to get rid of aspects which are not suitable for the presentation. From the main elements of a presentation which follow a greeting, introduction, body and conclusion, the chronology of the presentation, voice, gestures and hooks will be carefully analysed by the teacher and will be commented upon.

Apart from these physical traits observed by the researcher, studies have been conducted around the world to find out the reasons for anxiety in English speaking. Following are a few of them.

#### IV. REASONS FOR PRESENTATION ANXIETY

When considering the reasons for presentations anxiety, English speaking apprehension and public speaking fear, the following were revealed.

a) **Socio- cultural factors** have a huge impact on the learning motivation of the students. Family background, the income, the employment status and the education of the parents, all have an influence on

the English learning motivation of the learners no matter what their age group is (Vellymallay-suresh, (2012); Adekeye, A. (2002; Ahmad, & Naeema, (2013). The environment where one studies and is brought up in, has a huge impact on one's second language oral proficiency in this regard.

- b) **Teacher, learning environment and the material** are inter- connected factors which contribute to a learner's language development. The teacher's responsible in creating a suitable environment for the learner and must be tactful in choosing the teaching material as to not make students be de- motivated to talk. Task-based activities can be used to make the learner communicate more (Wijetunge, 2016).
- c) **Fear of being laughed at** has been identified has- been identified as a main reason that makes students be reticent in front of the classroom if they commit a language error. This is a common factor in Asia no matter to which age group the student belongs to. In a research conducted by Nazara (2011) it was discovered that students hesitate to communicate in ESL due to their shyness and because they have the notion that their teachers would scold them if they make a mistake in language.
- d) **Lack of chances for communication** within the classroom and insufficient hours for the subject (ESL) were noted as 2 of the most important reasons for the students to have inadequate language fluency and motivation (Meshkar&Hassam, 2012).
- e) **Fear of committing mistakes** has been recognized as a main reason for the students to be incompetent in communication. Aquino et al (2016) mentions making grammar or sentence structure errors while talking, wrong pronunciation and intonation, having insufficient vocabulary to converse, have been identified as the main reasons to have lack of motivation in the students.

## V. CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM AS A SCAFFOLDING TECHNIQUE

"Scaffolding refers to the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some tasks so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skills; he/she is in the process of acquiring" (Bruner, 1978). When conducting

oral presentations, the students are able to manage with their existing knowledge and skills. However, for them to do a successful job, the teacher can assist by offering them with comments and feed back in the means of scaffolding after observing their presentations. The students are expected to take advantage and benefit from these comments provided as constructive criticism and correct their mistakes and improve their existing skills to a much higher sphere. When the students reach the expected standard and master the art of presentations, the scaffolding will be removed.

Constructive criticism can be described as a "set of instructions that aims to collaboratively improve the overall quality of a product or service". (businessdictionary.com, 2017). This often includes helpful and specific suggestions for positive change and is particularly concerned on a particular issue or set of issues as opposed to providing general feedback". When a student with lack of presentation competence is provided the assistance of scaffolding, it is expected that the student will boost the competence level and improve his/ her speaking abilities. "Teachers' scaffolding allows reticent students to perform tasks slightly beyond their capabilities without repetitive guidance" (Talley, 2014).

Constructive criticism can be considered as 'feed back' as Hyland and Hyland (2001) describe "we consider this feedback in terms of its functions as praise, criticism, and suggestions". Speaking confidence can be enhanced while providing self-satisfaction to the students through "Praise" which is the most frequently employed function in the constructive feedback, but this is "often used to soften criticisms and suggestions rather than simply responding to good work". Constructive criticism can be offered by the teacher or the peers within the classroom. However, as the students are focused on specific traits they should improve individually to enhance their oral presentation performance; it will be mainly done by the teacher within the ESL classroom.

## VI. AIM

To find out a way to overcome speaking apprehension in undergraduates and enhance their oral presentation confidence through constructive criticism as a means of scaffolding.

## VII. RESEARCH QUESTION

Does constructive criticism work as a means of scaffolding to reduce English speaking and presentation apprehension?

## VIII. METHODOLOGY

This was an experimental study conducted using a mixed approach. A pre-test and a post-test were incorporated in the study and the data was analysed using the SPSS. The qualitative data which is mainly through observations were gathered twice. First prior to the study and then following the study. A small-scale interview on 20 random students was carried out later in the research to find out the opinion on the effectiveness of constructive criticism on their presentation abilities.

**Sample** - A sample of 39 Mechanical Engineering students in their 3rd semester were selected from purposive sampling.

**Method** - The students were grouped and were asked to present a power point presentation of 10-15 minutes based on a topic of preference, related to Engineering. Each individual was asked to take part when presenting. This was done as a part of an assignment following the 'presentation skills' lessons which was conducted in the 2nd semester. However, many presentation anxiety traits were identified by the observations and the marks that the students obtained (according to a rubric used by the researcher based in IELTS speaking) showed significantly low results.

Therefore, with the hope of improving their English speaking, presentation and public speaking skills the students were subjected to the research during 18 weeks (1 semester). One hour from their academics was taken for the research purpose. 'Presentation Skills' which is a part of their syllabus in the 3rd semester and how to conduct effective oral presentations was taught as a lesson during the semester.

An experimental research design was incorporated by the researcher following the above observations. The students were exposed to pre and post individual speaking activities

(6 weeks each). During the pre activities, the students were made to do an impromptu speech of 2-3 minutes. They were provided 2 minutes each for preparations. They were observed to find out their weaknesses and were given marks according to the rubric. The students were provided specific positive and negative criticism. Each week, 6 students were offered chances to speak and after each speech, they were provided comments. Both positive and negative and were suggested tips to improve their speaking and presentation skills. Following the above pre-test, the lecturer conducted a lesson on 'effective presentation techniques' and a few demonstrations were made within the class room using videos by 'effective speakers' and Toast Masters (TM). Toast Masters are fluent public speakers functioning under Toast Masters International which is a public speaking, training club. The TMs were asked to encourage the students and offer tips to the students to succeed in their presentations.

The students were later exposed to a post test which was based on impromptu speeches. However, 2 minutes were given for preparations. The students were again subjected to marking using the criteria. Later, the students were made to present another Power point presentation based on any Engineering matter and they were evaluated once more. This was considered an assignment. It was hypothesised that the students will have improved their presentation skills and marks based on the constructive criticism offered during the semester.

## IX. ANALYSIS

The analysis is mainly a mixed approach consisting of qualitative and quantitative analysis.

a) **Quantitative** - The paired t-test was performed to analyse if there is a significant difference between the two test marks obtained by students. When considering the mean values of the pre and post-tests, there is an increase in the marks as shown below. The value of 2 tail sig is significant (.000) as it is lesser than 0.05 ( $p < .05$ ). Meaning, the output indicates that there's a considerable difference between the pre and post test marks. Hypothesis that Scaffolding assistance provided during the semester had contributed to enhance the presentation skills and language skills in students was proven right. There is strong evidence ( $t = 0.000$ ) that the teaching intervention improves marks. 95% Confidence

**Table 1- SPSS analysis**

**Paired Samples Statistics**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	52.90	39	9.310	1.491
	Posttest	68.60	39	10.081	1.614

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair	Pretest & Posttest	39	.624	.000

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
18.441	11.623	38	.000

Interval of the Difference is (12.970-18.441). This confirms that the marks are practically important and also statistically significant.

b) **Qualitative** – 20 students were randomly interviewed following the study to find out their opinion on constructive criticism on presentations. Majority (95 %) explained that it was highly effective and that it helped them to identify their strengths and weaknesses. As they were able to identify their positive presentation skills, they declared that it was just a matter of improving their moderate areas and getting rid of their weak presentation skills. They mentioned that it was very effective as it was individual feedback and the comments received by the friendly approach of teacher and the comfortable classroom environment was beneficial for them to realize their faults. They also revealed that due to large number of students in the school classrooms, the teachers do not take the liberty in offering individual feed back to the students and therefore, this was their first chance to be exposed to comments such as these and the comments received by the fluent speakers such as the Toast Masters were highly productive in this regard.

A few mentioned that they were not aware that by observing other speakers (videos, TMs) they could improve their speaking and presentation abilities. However, 5% declared that they felt uncomfortable when their weak points were being pointed by the

teacher. Even though they had previously been advised that it was ‘constructive criticism’ from which they are supposed to benefit, it still embarrassed them.

I 10% mentioned that they even preferred to be given feed back by their colleagues during the preparations. This would help them to overcome their embarrassment and anxiety. Majority declared the opinion that, more opportunities to engage in public speaking, presentations and inter-action in English language will highly influence them to improve their communication competence.

**X. FINDINGS**

It was found out from the research that majority of the students were able to gain higher marks for the post test and the power point presentation following the lecture on how to conduct presentations and the guidance provided by the demonstrations (videos and TMs). These techniques were immensely beneficial in getting to know the best practices to be used during the oral presentations for students. The feedback offered by the lecturers and TMs at the end of the presentations, improved student’s public speaking fear and improved motivation immensely.

Therefore, it can be concluded that when students are provided the correct guidance with sufficient assistance and when their existing talents are praised while their weaknesses are pointed out individually by a well-known other, they recognize how to improve themselves well. Constructive criticism in this regard becomes a highly effective scaffolding technique in enhancing students’ oral presentation skills in English. As these are undergraduate students, they have the ability to correct their mistakes with the right advice and move further while mastering the presentation skills which will immensely be beneficial when engaging in the job market.

## XI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

When students are exposed to a friendly environment, they are willing to accept their weaknesses in speaking and are motivated to improve. Therefore, constructive criticism becomes a guide to enhance speaking in students. Teacher friendly approach is highly recommended specially for weak students. Undergraduates should first be made to experience firsthand demonstrations from experienced speakers and exposure to clubs such as 'Toast Masters' assist them to improve their knowledge and not feel frustrated about their inhibitions. As it is a part of these clubs to encourage the demotivated speakers into becoming great speakers, the students will never be discouraged. All students must be exposed to this environment or should be provided assistance from experienced speakers at their initial stages in the university. The lecturers can attend to this seriously. This can be made a part of English lectures. Allowing students have time to prepare for a presentation or a speech will result in better marks. Even pre tasks such as video, audio clips, demonstrations, work as scaffolding assistance.

Knowing the right tips can also make the students be motivated to speak. Therefore, a lesson or a seminar on 'Presentation Skills' should be conducted for all students and more chances should be provided for them to speak. They should also be provided responsibilities in organizing English discussions, forums and clubs where more opportunities will be made for the anxious students. In addition, it is suggested that future researchers find out to what extent the students are able to overcome their anxiety in speaking English through constructive criticism. Whether peer scaffolding can also be incorporated in enhancing oral performance in students can also be researched upon.

## XII. LIMITATIONS

The research had to be limited to one classroom and one stream of Engineering students due to the unavailability of time. Due to the time constraint, the interviews had to be limited to 20 students and the presentation times had to be limited to 10-15 minutes where some students did not get sufficient speaking time. The experimental study had to be based on impromptu speeches as the students had to present for 2-3 minutes only. Therefore, the preparation times were limited. Peer scaffolding was not sufficiently utilized in the study.

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