

Course Code: GEC 324

Course Title: Technical Communication

CHAPTER 4: ORAL COMMUNICATION AND PRESENTATION

4.1 Background

Secondary schools throughout Nigeria used to have very strong ‘Literary and Debating Societies’. Some schools still have such societies but they are very few and the societies are not as active as they used to be.

An active debating society provides a forum for youngsters to learn and practice the art of oral communication and presentation from the teenage years. A student selected to represent his class or school knew that he had two main tasks, namely: finding something informative and interesting to say, and saying it effectively. It was not always easy, particularly because the topics were usually imposed on the speakers. For example a student might be required to speak for or against a position such as ‘We are Happier than Our Forefathers’, or ‘School Examinations are Unnecessary’, or ‘Corporal Punishment should be Abolished in Schools’ and so on. You were simply given the ‘pro’ or the ‘con’ to prepare. It could also be a ‘Balloon’ debate in which you competed to be the only one that would go up in the balloon as the most useful to the society among a group comprising, for instance, a teacher, a lawyer, an engineer and a farmer. Again the profession that you were to represent and defend was imposed. You had no choice.

Whether the youngsters of today have opportunities to learn practical oral presentation and communication in school or not, their need to present materials orally is at least as great as those of the older generations. Final year students in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the National Diploma and the Bachelor’s Degrees are often

required to write a final year long essay or a dissertation, and to present their work orally before a critical panel of examiners made up of their teachers/lecturers and (in some cases) external examiners. Presentations are also required after 3 or 6 months Students' Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES). This is always an avenue for students to give a summary of practical knowledge acquired during the period of Industrial Trainings (IT). Also, professionals most especially Engineers often have oral presentations to make at conferences, seminars, workshops; lecture halls and sometimes, courtrooms.

To provide brief guidelines for effective oral presentation, the following must be looked at:

4.2 Basic Information Needed

Any person who is invited, or otherwise required, to give a talk or make any form of oral presentation should seek to have two (2) pieces of information before commencing preparation or even before accepting. The questions to ask are:

- (a) What audience?
- (b) How much time (do I have) for the presentation?

No one can prepare properly for an oral presentation without having a good idea of the composition of the audience. For example, a talk on the topic 'Water Pollution and its Control' can be given before an audience consisting of school children and may also be given at an international forum comprising of Govt. Agencies, ADP, WHO, FEPA, UNICEF etc. The same topic could be the subject of a public lecture to a general audience, or to professionals in this area of knowledge. A different type of presentation would be required for each of these groups. The variables to be considered include the

choice of vocabulary and terminologies, the quantum and type of information to be given and the graphic aids to be used in the presentation. These variables are necessary and essential.

Knowledge of the time period available for the oral presentation is also of paramount importance. For a given audience, a speaker, to be effective, would need to know whether he has 10 minutes, 30 minutes or one hour to make his presentation.

A speaker who continues to speak fifteen minutes or more after he was to have stopped could displease his audience and lose its attention. In the same vein, a speaker who finishes in one-half of the time allotted is unlikely to be well thought of by a serious audience. It is therefore necessary to plan well so as to complete the presentation as close to the end of the time period allotted as possible. It is also necessary and important to know if there would be question from the audience.

4.3 Preparing the Speech

Preparation of the speech is dependent on the forum at which it would be presented. Possible methods of preparing a speech include the following:

(a) **Writing out** the whole speech in such a way that it would be read to the audience directly. This is the method adopted for preparing inaugural lectures, public lectures, matriculation and convocation addresses, and other highly formal addresses, such as to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

(b) **Writing out** the whole speech and **memorizing** it: This is not a common method of speech preparation. It is used by primary school pupils, secondary school students and campus politicians. It is totally inappropriate for a mature audience.

(c) **Preparing the speech in outline form** and developing each item during the presentation. This is practiced by those who have good knowledge of the topic being presented.

(d) **Writing out** the whole report **and preparing an outline** from it:

This is a modification of, and an improvement on (c) above.

(e) If the audience is not large, the **speech could be produced in sufficient quantities** to go round. It could then be distributed just before the presentation. The presenter would go through the write-up without necessarily reading it. He could explain or summarize the content of the selected headings. This is the practice at most workshops, seminars and conferences.

4.4 Use of Information Technology

Whatever the form of preparation of the speech that may be adopted, graphic aids may be used during the actual presentation. Advancement in Information Technology has resulted in the down-sizing of facilities for oral presentation. For instance, the use of hardcopy etcha-chrome slides with slide projector or of hand-drawn transparencies for projection on an illuminator has given way for the slim, portable multimedia projector which receives images and text materials from a personal computer. The use of graphic aids in the oral presentation of a report often makes the message being conveyed more interesting, easier to grasp, and clearer to the audience. It is important to have the graphic aids to be used in the presentation carefully selected and properly prepared.

The graphic aid may be in form of a real object or a model of it. It could also be in form of photographs, tables or figures. These graphic aids may be prepared manually or

with the aid of the computer. The software ideal for oral presentation are Microsoft PowerPoint and Corel Presentation, which depending on the dexterity of the presenter (or producer) could combine interesting animations and audio and video graphics that will keep the audience in rapt attention. The computer can be connected to a liquid crystal display (LCD) or a digital light processing (DLP) projector which displays the illustrations on a large screen.

If the graphic aid would not be clear and neat, or would not make a positive contribution to the understanding of the subject matter, it should be left out.

The emphasis should therefore be on relevant software applications and to also acknowledge and underscore the use of computer in report writing/technical communication. The computer is an efficient tool for information processing and the PC is now being applied in virtually all areas of human activities, including report writing. Various applications software are available to execute a wide variety of tasks including word processing, data management, plotting of graphs, system analysis and simulation, Computer Aided Design and Drafting (CADD), Computer Aided Instructions (CAI), Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAM), etc.

Three classes of applications software; namely, **word processors** - for text processing, **spreadsheets** – for preparation of graphic aids i.e tables, charts, graphs, diagrams and sketches and **presentation graphics** – for oral presentation, are valuable tools in technical communication.

4.5 Making the Presentation

The success of an oral presentation depends largely on the quality of preparation made; namely the preparation of the speech bearing in mind the type of audience, the venue, the time allotted and the selection and preparation of graphic aids. Nevertheless, the possibility of a faulty presentation cannot be ruled out. All but the most experienced speakers can become nervous in front of an audience before which the speech is to be made.

The following guidelines may be helpful:

- ❖ Face the audience as a whole, do not look at individuals.
- ❖ If there is a stationary microphone, be careful not to walk away from it.
- ❖ Where no such microphone is being used walking a little bit should be in order. However, stiffly pacing about should be avoided.
- ❖ Be audible to all members of the audience, and yet avoid being too loud.
- ❖ Excessive hand movement, toying with objects, and other odd and obvious habits or mannerisms, should be avoided. They are indicative of nervousness and may distract the audience.
- ❖ Be prepared to answer questions; anticipate questions so as to be able to answer most of them; and make a distinction between knowing the answer to a particular question, not knowing the answer, and hazarding a guess. First understand the question before attempting to answer it.
- ❖ Be courteous to the audience and to the questioner, if any.
- ❖ The presentation of graphic aids should be carefully timed for optimum effectiveness.

- ❖ As much as possible, stay within the time allocated.

4.6 Exercises

1. List five (5) different oral presentations in which it is advisable, perhaps compulsory, to read from text rather than use outlines. Explain fully.
2. You are requested to give a seminar on use of graphic aids in oral presentation. Prepare the notes that you would use.
3. You are invited or required to give a talk on the topic: “The Adverse Effect of Climate Change on Water Quality and Irrigation Farming”. Discuss clearly what pieces of information you should seek to have before commencing on preparation or even before accepting.
4. List some signs of nervousness during speech-making. Identify some curative measures.

Reading List -

1. Ogedengbe, M.O., Akanbi, C.T., Oladepo, K.T. and Adewumi, I.K. (2005). Technical Report Writing. Macmillan Nig. Publishers Ltd, Lagos. Nigeria. 95pp.
2. Odigboh, E. U and Osuagwu, C.C. (2003): Effective Communication of Technical Ideas in Science and Engineering. Top Quality Services, Energy Lab. Physics Dept. University of Nigeria, Nsukka. 374pp.

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