

USING EXTEMPORE AS A TASK TO IMPROVE ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Dr. Deepa S

Department: Humanities & Liberal Arts in Management

Affiliation: Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode

Abstract

In the present era of competition, there is a surge in the demand of employees with thorough knowledge of soft skills. Communication skills, both written and oral, go a long way in enhancing the soft skills of b-school students, who are waiting to be welcomed by the corporate world as valued assets. Various courses are offered by different b-schools and universities to achieve this end. Several methods, techniques are used to develop these skills in students. One such method is Extempore that assists students not only in thinking on their feet but also in voicing their creative ideas with precision. This paper explores the use of extempore to enhance the oral communication skills of b-school students. It is based on an experiment conducted in a class size of 104 students pursuing post-graduate diploma in management from a b-school. The findings of the results displayed by students give an insight into the fact that extempore can be an effective way to train them for the present scenario where articulating one's thoughts wisely and precisely is of utmost importance.

Key Words: Extempore, corporate, oral communication skills

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Introduction

“Oral communication fulfills a number of general and discipline-specific academic functions. Students need to speak well in their personal lives, future workplaces, social interactions, and political endeavors. They will have to attend meetings, make presentations, participate in discussions and arguments, and work with groups. If necessary instruction and opportunities to practice speaking are available, students place themselves to achieve a wide range of goals and be useful members of their communities” (Deepa S, 2012).

Extempore is an impromptu speech that is delivered with little or no preparation. Even though it is spontaneous, it requires great effort to deliver an extempore successfully. Extempore stands for “off the cuff.” In the corporate setup, ‘extempore’ is one of the ways to evaluate a prospective employee’s communication skills and thinking abilities. It has become a benchmark of one’s social alertness. Of late, organizations have begun to lay more emphasis on employing wholesome individuals who can think on their feet; and resort to wise but quick action. Today, the mantra of vertical growth is the ability to interact with the top-level management and clients with utmost ease and ingenuity, apart from ‘doing one’s job well’. For all those who aspire to relish responsible and accountable designations, being able to discuss ‘any topic under the sun’ is an essential quality to participate in a power lunch.

Oral Communication Skills

The findings of Di Salvo, Larsen, & Sellar (1974) indicate the following as the most important communication activities: listening, routine information exchange, advising, persuading, instructing and small group problem-solving. These were based on a survey of graduates of a college of business administration five years after they finished their

university training. The results of the Di Salvo et al. (1974) study clearly show the significance of communication requiring strong personal contact at the interpersonal, small group and organization level. It is also a matter of fact that communication, unlike many other academic subjects, causes anxiety in students which could continue on into the organizational world.

Oral reporting skills act as a key to success in any career, especially in management. The stress on these skills has frequently been discussed (Nelton, 1991; Francese, 1994; Lubin, 2007). A survey of 725 upper and middle managers identified presentation skills as the most important skill needed for success in today's business environment ("Critical Link," 1991). Maes, Weldy, and Icenogle (1997) also found managers mentioned oral communication skills as the top skill required.

The significance of communication skills prevails even to this day. Gail Golden, a consultant for RHR International, an executive-coaching firm, states that the skill "is really important for careers success, promotions and professional credibility" (Lubin, 2007). Out of the 34 business-related skills, making effective oral presentations was ranked second by department chairs as the individual skill which they believed was most essential for graduating business students (Wardrope, 2002). Some studies suggest that new graduates of business programs are not equipped with the proper skills to orally communicate effectively (Gray, 2010). Sapp and Zhang (2009) found that in a study of 234 business supervisors over a five year period, "spoken communication skills" was cited as one of four skills of eleven where most skills development is needed by business interns in their organizations.

"Oral communication can take many forms, ranging from informal conversation that occurs spontaneously and, in most cases, for which the content cannot be planned, to participation in meetings, which occurs in a structured environment, usually with a set agenda" (Rahman, Mojibur M., 2010).

Oral communication is a combination of language, its use in communication, and several other skills like: audience understanding, active listening, non-verbal communication (eye contact, facial expressions, body language) style, conciseness amongst others. It is assumed that the students pursuing post-graduation are aware of the basics of the language and therefore teaching speaking skills becomes irrelevant. What they need at that stage is communication skills. The challenge for the teacher here is to know the needs of the individual students. The best way to comprehend this is to observe and understand how the learners perform a task in the class. To acquire such skills, task-based approach appears to be the most appropriate (S, Deepa2012).

Task-based Approach

Task-based syllabus design has been the interest area of quite a few researchers and curriculum developers in second/foreign language teaching in the mid 80s (Long 1985; Breen 1987; Prabhu1987; Nunan 1989). This was basically the outcome of the pervasive awareness to the communicative language teaching. Under the rubric of task-based instruction, a variety of approaches can be found, e.g., “procedural syllabuses,” “process syllabuses,” and “task-based language teaching” (Long and Crookes 1993). Primarily, the term “task” itself has been a complex concept, defined and analyzed from various perspectives (Crookes 1986; Duff 1986; Foley 1991; Crookes and Gass 1993a, b; Sheen1994; Lantolf and Appel 1994; Skehan 1996).

The last two decades have seen a remarkable growth in task-based language learning and teaching (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1998a; and Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2000a). The interest is because “task” is seen as a construct of equal importance to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and to language teachers (Pica, 1997). “Task” is not only a means of clinically eliciting samples of learner language for purposes of research (Corder, 1981) but also a device for organizing the content and methodology of language teaching (Prabhu, 1987). On the other hand, as Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2000b) point out, “task” is viewed differently depending on whether the perspective is that of research or pedagogy.

Task-based language teaching has many purposes. Willis (1996: 35–6) identifies eight purposes:

1. to give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know;
2. to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction;
3. to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings;
4. to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak;
5. to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively;
6. to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences;
7. to give learners chances to try out communication strategies; and
8. to develop learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals.

These purposes relate to two general goals: communicative effectiveness and L2 acquisition. Interestingly, seven of Willis's purposes relate primarily to communicative effectiveness; only one, (3) relates specifically to L2 acquisition. This reflects, perhaps, the general perception among language teachers and educators that task-based teaching is mainly directed at improving students' abilities to *use* the target language rather than enabling them to *acquire* new linguistic skills (Samuda, 2000). It is in contrast with the orientation of SLA researchers such as Long, Skehan and Swain, whose primary concern is how tasks can contribute to language acquisition.

The Oral Communication Skills Course (OCS)

The course under discussion was offered as a core course in the second trimester in the Postgraduate Diploma in Management Programme at a private B-school. The course content was as follows:

1. Getting comfortable with English as a language The nature, purpose and characteristics of good conversation

2. Using English in conversation: introductions, greetings, gratitude, opinions, explanations
3. Conversing with suitable stress, intonation and meaning
4. Making small talks: Initiating, maintaining and concluding conversations
5. Communicating disagreement and anything negative
6. Formal and informal group discussions and handling situations
7. Presentation skills
8. Gestures and body language

Initial activities in this course included: Course Discussion, Introductions, Extempore, Listening and participating sessions. Core activities included: Group Discussion, Role-play, Oral presentations. Supporting activities comprised: Problem-solving communication activities, Cross-cultural presentations in groups. These were followed by the Fusion activity which required students to work on a group project.

Literature Review

In the last few years, there has been a growing awareness and a need to identify the intangible factors which play a vital role in an individual's success at the workplace. Varied studies have been done in the past related to such areas. Many experts have in the past worked on and concluded that these extra skills which help to attain success at the workplace are indeed highly valuable. Two researchers, Jacobs and Marshall, discuss the importance of the specific class of skills that allow value additions to a person's worth. Though none of them use the term, they actually consider it to be soft skills.

Stitch and others (1974) have developed a model of communication Skills development which describes the progressive acquisition of oracy and literacy. They first identify basic capacities of hearing - seeing and motor movements. These develop into the skills of listening, looking, uttering and marking. Comprehending meaningful speech and producing meaningful utterances come next. These skills are referred to as listening and speaking. Lastly, reading and writing skills develop.

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The development of oral communication skills is a lifelong process. Adolescents and adults develop skills in language usage differentially for various functions and situations. Many achieve big levels of competence, while some still cannot demonstrate many basic skills such as giving direction or engaging in social interaction. (Mead, Nancy A).

Graduates should focus on their communication skills and attitude if they want to climb the corporate career ladder, according to a recent study of finance and HR managers by Robert Half Finance & Accounting. Almost 1,550 managers were asked which skills they look for when hiring a financial starter. Communication skills were cited as the most important by almost half (46%) of respondents, closely followed by an open-minded attitude (35%). The respondents said the most common mistakes made by graduates were weak communication skills, problems adapting to the corporate culture and lack of a proactive attitude. When selecting between candidates with no previous experience over another with the same qualifications, 64% said that personality and attitude was by far the biggest draw card.

The need for business professionals to have effective communication skills in order to be successful has become conventional wisdom within both the academy (Gibson, 2002; Graduate Management Admission Council, 2007; Schultz, 2006; Thill&Bovée, 2005) and wider public discourse (Florida, 2003; Friedman, 2007). With globalization, this crucial competency is becoming an ever more important imperative to succeed in the world market (Casady& Wasson, 1994).

The primary training that business professionals receive to develop communication skills occurs during college and university study. Unfortunately, already-packed undergraduate curricula have limited space, and the ideal of having numerous business communication courses usually goes unrealized (Athavale, Davis, &Myring, 2008). An answer to this dilemma is a call for increased interdisciplinarity of coursework to stress the connections among business fields – especially business communication – and to develop students

into well-rounded business professionals with the interpersonal skills that they need in order to be successful.

The National Business Education Association (2006) states that students should be able to communicate in a clear, courteous, concise, and correct manner on personal and professional levels and emphasizes that these communication skills should not be limited to a single course but integrated throughout the business curriculum. Students need to be reminded that they might be hired for their technical skills, but they will be promoted for their communication skills (Murphy & Hildebrandt, 1988).

College alumni have ranked communication courses as the most important courses that led to their advancement and promotions (Gustafson, Johnson, & Hovey, 1993; Hinkin, 1996; Murphy & Hildebrandt, 1988).

Research shows that people employed in business require strong speaking and writing skills to manage multifaceted and rapidly changing environments (North & Worth, 1998).

Research Methodology

In the course titled *Oral Communication Skills*, extempore was used as one of the methods to enhance the oral communication skills of Management students. The students were first told about the nuances of extempore: the preparation, the process, and the dos and don'ts. They were given a practice session based on which they were prompted to work upon their areas of weakness. Personalized feedback was given to each one of them.

Extempore was then used to evaluate their oral communication skills. Each student was given two topics with an option to speak on one of those. Topics were selected from diverse areas ranging from political and social issues to hypothetical situations to general awareness amongst others. (See Annexure 1: List of Topics)

Students were then evaluated on a point-scale of 25 where the distribution was as follows:

Content – 10 (Topic Clarity; and Logic – 5 each.)

Expression – 10 (Pitch and Voice Modulation; and Accuracy – 3 each, Language – 4)

Body Language – 5 (Eye Contact and Gestures – 2 each, Facial Expressions – 1)

Findings

As is evident from the given tables, it is interesting to note that almost 60% of the students showed a very good command over topic clarity, and 39% of them were good at the same (Table 1). With regard to logic, 42% students displayed very good logical ability while 56% of them proved to have good logical skills (Table 1). Almost 63% students were very good at the language while 37% had a good knowledge of the same (Table 2). In the pitch and voice modulation, 92% students displayed good ability while approximately 4% of them were very good at it (Table 2). As regards accuracy, 91% of the students showed a good amount of it while 6% students displayed an average degree of accuracy (Table 2). In relation to eye contact, approximately 54% students seemed to possess an excellent command over eye contact while 46% of them had a good hold over the aspect (Table 3). 36% of the students had excellent gestures while 64% were good at the same (Table 3). 71% students had excellent facial expressions while 29% of them were good in the area (Table 3). The overall evaluation of the students proved that approximately 38% students had very good extempore skills; about 59% of them were good at it; while only about 3% students fell in the average category of understanding of extempore skills (Table 4).

A 6-item survey was created to explore students' perception about extempore. It was conducted before announcing the results of their performance. The findings of the same are as follows:

- 83% students agreed with the statement that extempore is an effective way to improve communication skills (Fig.1).

- 88% students accepted that extempore helped boost confidence (Fig. 2).
- 93% students believed that it assisted in managing time (Fig. 3).
- 62% felt that the duration for extempore should be 2 to 3 minutes (Fig. 4).
- Only 13% students found it very easy to give an extempore speech (Fig. 5).
- 93% students felt that topic plays a vital role in extempore (Fig. 6).

Conclusion

It is the perception of the students that holds them from taking an initiative in extempore. However, once they initiate, they find it quite comfortable to speak for 2/3 minutes without preparation, on a given topic – provided the topics are within the areas of their interest. Along with the other methods like debate, group discussion, and elocution, extempore can be used not only to enhance the oral communication skills of students but also to assist them in gaining confidence for further formal oral discourses, which would be required of them in the corporate world.

Scope for Further Research

This study was basically an exploratory research to see if extempore could be used to evaluate oral communication skills of Management students. Based on the findings, it is easy to conclude that with proper planning, sensible use of this method can be made to find out the level these students have attained in oral communication skills. Although this study was conducted on 104 students of a Management institute, there is a lot of scope for further research. All management institutes (B-Schools) have a more urgent need for developing the soft skills of their products. We can expand our research to these as well as other institutes like Engineering, IT, Aviation, Hospitality, and others to further look into the variations with which this method can be used to evaluate and enhance oral communication skills, which form a vital part of soft skills. Besides, it would be interesting to know how the educators feel about it as a requisite to boost the confidence level of the students. The craving to raise academic performance and, at the same time, to

provide opportunities for students to be successful at the workplace creates sizeable challenges for educators. Further research in this area could provide exciting ideas to fulfill the existing gap between education curricula and industry demands.

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TABLES

Table 1 – Content

Range	Topic Clarity (5)	Logic (5)
2 – 3 (Fair)	1	2
3 – 4 (Good)	39	56
4 – 5 (Very Good)	60	42

Table 2 – Expression

Range	Language (4)	Pitch & Voice Modulation (3)	Accuracy (3)
1 – 2 (Fair)	0	4	6
2 – 3 (Good)	38	92	91
3 – 4 (Very Good)	62	4	3

Table 3 – Body Language

Range	Eye Contact (2)	Gestures (2)	Facial Expressions (1)
0 – 1 (Fair)	46	64	29
1 – 2 (Good)	54	36	71

Table 4 – Total Marks

Range	Percentage
10 – 15 (Average)	3
15 – 20 (Good)	59
20 – 25 (Very Good)	38

FIGURES

Fig. 1

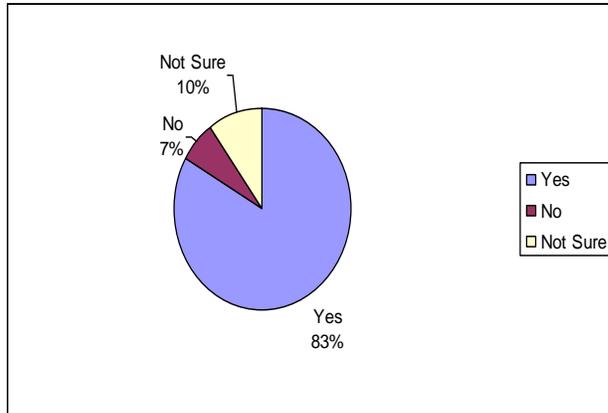


Fig. 2

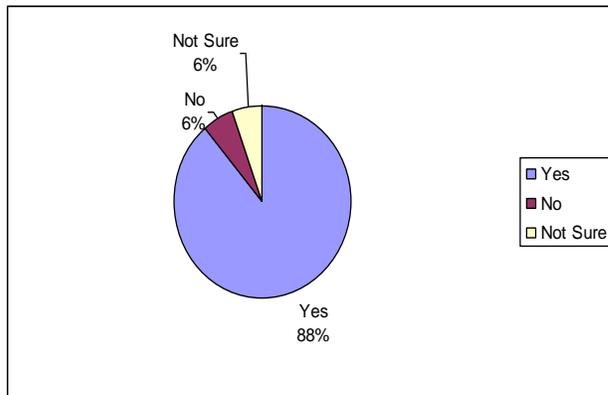


Fig. 3

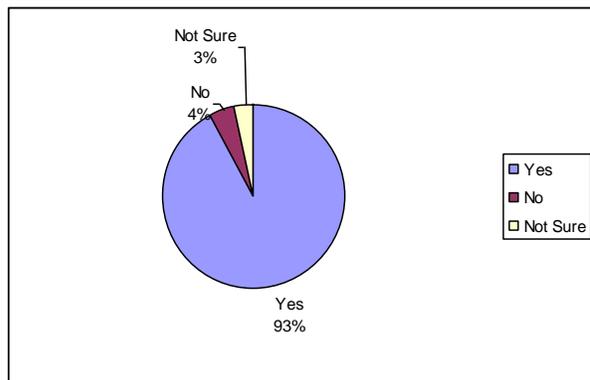


Fig. 4

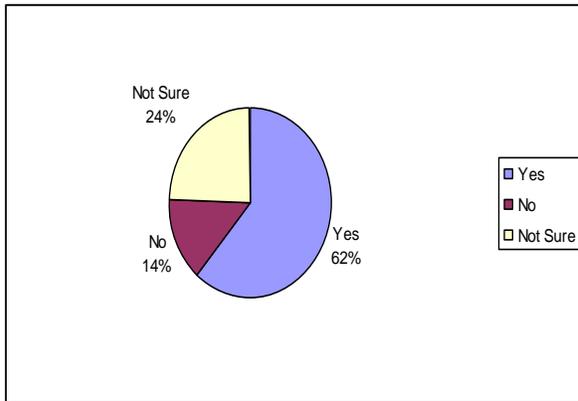


Fig. 5

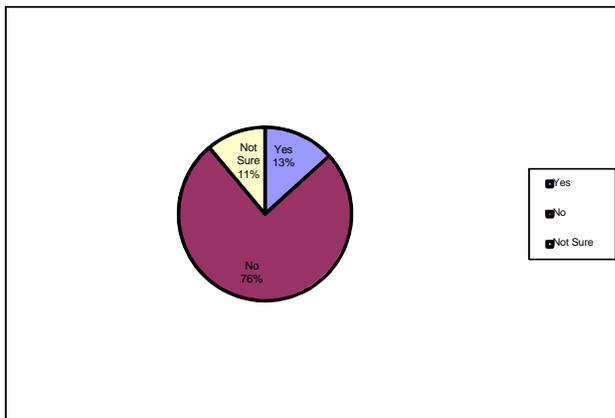
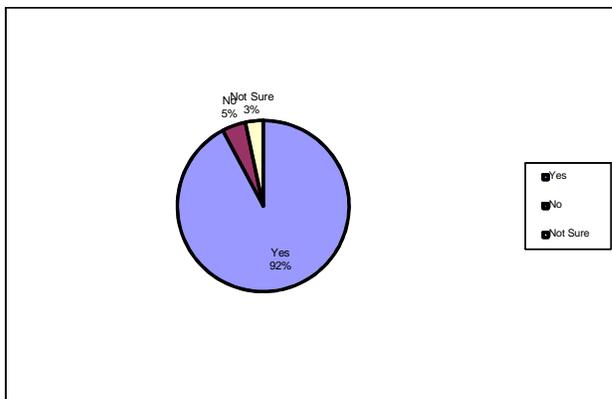


Fig. 6



Annexure 1 – Survey Questionnaire

Rate the following on a 5-point Likert scale where:

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Partially Agree
4. Disagree
5. Totally Disagree

1. Extempore Speech is an effective way to improve communication skills.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

2. It helped boost confidence.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

3. It assisted in managing time.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

4. Extempore Speech duration should be 2 to 3 minutes.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

5. It is very easy to give an extempore speech.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

6. Topic plays a vital role in Extempore.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

Annexure 2 – Partial List of Extempore Topics

1. If there were no chairs
2. Hard work or Smart work
3. If there were no bathing soaps
4. If given a piece of land, what would you like to cultivate
5. Group Discussion as a selection tool is only a formality
6. If you hear your colleagues gossiping about you
7. If given an opportunity, what would you like to re-live – your childhood or your youth?
8. If wrestling is introduced in your institution as a compulsory subject
9. Indian girls should not be a part of beauty pageants
10. Laughter is the best medicine
11. Silence is golden
12. All that glitters is not gold
13. Girls are better Managers than Boys
14. If there were no beauty parlours/saloons
15. Which is your favorite color & why?
16. Hope and Happiness are the two sides of the same coin
17. If you had wool on your head instead of hair
18. Marriages are made in heaven
19. Suggest a roadmap to Success
20. Values and work go hand in hand
21. Tube lights are better than bulbs
22. Question Mark
23. Stop, look and go
24. To stay in one place, you have to run very fast
25. If you had unlimited resources, what would you do to improve your business?
26. What do you like best about what you do? Why?