

Linguistic and Paralinguistic Affective Factors in Assessing Students' Oral Presentations

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Abstract

This study explored how college teachers evaluate their students' oral presentations, the criteria they use for assessment and their overall impressions. Adopting a case study approach for this purpose, a sample comprising four English teachers from three different colleges was selected to assess both extempore speeches and group discussions of students. Key findings indicated that teachers consider, in their evaluation, both linguistic elements such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as well as the content and relevance of the topics of the presentations. They also evaluated paralinguistic features: body language, energy, passion, and sincerity of the presentation. This highlights the significance of non-verbal communication. The teacher-evaluators believe that both the linguistic and paralinguistic features of oral presentation assessment provide a more holistic evaluation approach to oral presentation. The approach ensures that various aspects of effective communication are recognized and rewarded in the assessment. Given these findings, this holistic assessment method not only fosters students' linguistic proficiency but also emphasizes the importance of non-verbal cues in effective communication, ultimately contributing to their overall presentation skills. It follows from this that clear presentations and confidence demonstrate thorough preparation and engagement with the audience.

Keywords: Assessment, Oral presentation, Linguistic features, pronunciation, paralinguistic

- **Received:** February 24, 2025
- **Accepted:** April 22, 2025
- **Published:** April 27, 2025

DOI: 10.56540/jesaf.v4i1.115

To cite this article (APA):

Kalpana, R. & Al-Khulaidi, M. A. (2025). Linguistic and paralinguistic affective factors in assessing students' oral presentations. *Journal of English Studies in Arabia Felix*, 4(1), 23-33.

DOI: 10.56540/jesaf.v4i1.115

Introduction

Oral presentation skills are an integral part of 21st-century skills (Liang & Kelsen, 2018; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). In today's globalized world, speaking skills are recognized as essential for international mobility, entrance to higher education, and employment (Fulcher, 2015; Grieve et al., 2021; Isaacs, 2016). Effective oral communication in the target language is often emphasized as essential for achieving successful integration and removing barriers to academic performance (Liang & Kelsen, 2018). It is also required for adequately performing on a job, accessing vital social services, and, on a more macro level, mitigating social isolation and reducing language barriers in linguistically heterogeneous societies (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Isaacs, 2013).

Similarly, it is deemed essential at university. Even at the entry-level, students are expected to display acceptable oral communication skills (Alshare & Hindi, 2004; Martin-Young, 1996). Grieve et al. (2021) explored the fears and challenges students face with oral presentations and public speaking in higher education. Six key themes surfaced from this study: fear of judgment, physical symptoms, uncertainty about the topic, negative impacts on the university experience, the importance of practice and preparation, and the need for more practical support. The findings highlight the significant effect of public speaking anxiety on students' academic experiences and suggest that institutions should provide better support for oral presentation assessments. Likewise, Kakepoto et al. (2012) investigated the factors affecting oral presentations of engineering students in Pakistan, particularly in the context of workplace environments. The study, which involved 25 final-year engineering students from two universities in Pakistan, highlighted the importance of oral presentation skills for engineers to meet industry demands and enhance workplace productivity. Key barriers were poor presentation skills, confidence, nervousness, and limited vocal variety. The findings emphasize the need for targeted training to prepare engineering students for professional communication challenges.

When it comes to evaluating oral presentation skills, both a student's knowledge and ability to communicate effectively are considered, as they offer valuable insights into real-world communication skills. In many educational settings, particularly in Indian engineering colleges, demonstrating proficient speaking skills seems to be the priority for major stakeholders, including companies that approach these colleges for placement. These companies value technical skills in the respective engineering domains but also place a significant emphasis on strong oral presentation skills. A substantial percentage of engineering graduates are absorbed by engineering and IT workforces, where they are required to make presentations and conduct meetings that necessitate effective oral communication. Therefore, good oral presentation skills are an important competence required in the workplace.

In the context of India in general and Tamilnadu in particular, the reality of engineering colleges students' oral presentation assessment by teachers is a fertile area for scholarly inquiry and little has been done in this regard. A preliminary study of the various syllabi from different engineering colleges in Tamilnadu reveals a strong emphasis on English-speaking skills. These skills are included as important course outcomes and are well articulated in their syllabi. Most engineering colleges have extensive oral presentations and group discussions as key components of assessment (Alshammari & Mugaddam, 2023). In oral presentations, students present information to their peers and instructors to effectively convey knowledge and improve their communication skills (Lin, 2023). In classrooms of these colleges, students are asked to choose a topic of their choice, prepare beforehand, and make a presentation on that topic for 3-5 minutes. The teacher examines the presentations of the learners and assesses them on a scale of ten.

While much has been written about the individual components of assessment, there is limited research exploring how teachers synthesize these criteria in practice. In the context of engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu, there is a notable lack of research on how teachers evaluate learners' oral presentation skills. This study aims to address this gap within its local context, potentially offering insights that could inspire similar efforts both regionally and internationally. With this in mind, the present study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. How do college teachers rate the oral presentations of their learners at Tamilnadu College?
2. What are the specific criteria they consider worthwhile for assessing oral presentations of learners?

Literature Review

The concepts discussed under this section include oral presentation importance and competency, features both linguistic and paralinguistic, assessment approaches, while at the same time reviewing previous literature.

Oral presentations: competency and importance

Oral presentations, entailing linguistic spoken verbal communication aided by paralinguistic non-verbal factors, are highly significant across disciplines. Presentation proficiency is widely regarded as a critical competency for individuals with advanced academic qualifications across disciplines (Kerby & Romine, 2009; Van Ginkel et al., 2015a). Within higher education frameworks, this skill is deemed vital for graduates' workplace efficacy, career advancement, and civic engagement in democratic systems (Chan, 2011; Smith & Sodano, 2011). Global policy institutions further recognize its significance as a foundational professional attribute (Van Ginkel et al., 2015a), a perspective institutionalized in accreditation standards such as the Dublin Descriptors' emphasis on communication competencies (Washer, 2007). Presentations serve multifunctional purposes, including knowledge dissemination, persuasion, and audience interaction (De Grez, 2009). Despite its professional ubiquity, studies indicate persistent deficits in graduates' public speaking abilities (Chan, 2011). The construct encompasses an integrated mastery of cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains, defined by De Grez (2009) as "the synthesis of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for public address to inform, express, connect, or influence" (p. 5).

Linguistic and paralinguistic Features

In oral presentations, both linguistic and paralinguistic features play pivotal roles in effectively conveying a speaker's message (Al-Kadi & Al-Maktary, 2022). Liang and Kelsen (2018) highlight the influence of personality and motivation on oral presentation performance, emphasizing the significance of linguistic proficiency in structuring and delivering content clearly and coherently. Complementing these insights, Guyer et al. (2021) explored how paralinguistic features, such as tone, pitch, and speech rate—communicated through voice can profoundly affect appraisals of confidence and evaluative judgments by listeners. A study by Al-Kadi and Al-Maktary (2022) explores the development of prosodic competence—how well individuals use rhythm, stress, and intonation in speech. The study highlighted prosodic skills for more natural and expressive communication.

In another relevant context, Algamal and Alqohfa (2023) revealed that anxiety and shyness were significant inhibitors to learning and led to poor performance and difficulties in using the language in conversations. The study emphasizes the need to address these affective factors and suggests strategies to mitigate their negative effects. Together, these studies underscore the importance of not only what is being said (linguistic features) but also how it is being said (paralinguistic features), illustrating the complex interplay between verbal and non-verbal elements in enhancing the overall impact and persuasiveness of oral presentations.

In language assessment, research efforts have been dedicated to speaking assessment, especially oral presentations (Alshammari & Mugaddam, 2023). The literature records the challenges of assessing speaking skills in general. Several researchers have worked towards developing rubrics for oral presentation assessment. Previous researchers (Bower et al., 2011; De Grez et al., 2009; Reitmeier & Vrchota, 2009) used instruments for assessing presentation skills. Instructor assessment, peer assessment, and self-assessment are some of the tools widely used in various universities for assessing oral presentations. However, in the researcher's context, learners are graded by the instructor alone.

Assessment of oral presentation

Assessing students' oral presentations has been a focal point in educational research, particularly in language learning and communication studies. Existing literature highlights

that the evaluation of oral presentations often combines linguistic and paralinguistic features, as both dimensions are critical to effective communication.

Assessment by the instructor alone has been in use for a long time and has its own strength of providing reliable feedback and grades. Sterling (2008) argued that instructor assessment helps students to accurately understand the subtler aspects of oral presentations. Ochy et al. (1999) recommended a combined use of assessment strategies, enabling students to become responsible for their learning. Sterling (2008) further recommended that analyzing student presentations from the perspectives of peer, self, and expert assessments would provide more useful feedback and learning opportunities.

Research has extensively discussed the importance of linguistic elements, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, in oral presentations. Standardized language proficiency tests like TOEFL and IELTS incorporate these features into their evaluation criteria, underscoring their universal significance. For example, TOEFL's speaking rubric emphasizes the accurate and effective use of grammar and vocabulary, control of sentence structures, and coherence in discourse (ETS, 2022). Similarly, IELTS speaking band descriptors focus on fluency, lexical resources, grammatical range, and pronunciation (British Council, 2022). These frameworks provide a benchmark for teachers assessing student presentations, ensuring that linguistic competence is a key aspect of evaluation.

In addition to linguistic features, non-verbal communication plays a substantial role in oral presentation assessments. Studies on paralinguistic factors suggest that body language, eye contact, gestures, and vocal delivery are vital components of effective presentations (Mehrabian, 1972). Non-verbal cues can convey confidence, sincerity, and engagement, influencing audience perception and overall impact. Researchers have observed that successful presenters not only articulate their ideas clearly but also demonstrate enthusiasm, passion, and connection with their audience, which significantly enhances their delivery (De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2009).

Several scholars advocate for a holistic approach to assessing oral presentations, integrating both linguistic and paralinguistic features. This perspective acknowledges the multifaceted nature of communication, where content, structure, and delivery are interdependent. For instance, Richards and Rodgers (2014) argue that combining verbal and non-verbal criteria results in a more comprehensive evaluation, ensuring that diverse aspects of communicative competence are recognized and rewarded.

Method

A case study approach was employed for data collection. It was chosen for an in-depth understanding of the complex issues of the research problem. This approach is particularly valuable for addressing the research problem by providing insights into how college teachers evaluate linguistic and paralinguistic aspects, offering a nuanced understanding of their assessment methods.

Participants

Four English teachers from three different colleges were chosen for the study and all four teachers were working in autonomous colleges where they assessed both extempore speeches and group discussions. The researcher selected the teachers based on the number of years of experience and their experience with assessing speaking and willingness to participate in the survey. All these four teachers had a minimum of ten years of experience and not less than 50-60 students in their classes. Their syllabi allowed a 12-20% weightage for teaching spoken skills. They teach students from both urban and rural backgrounds, a typical class composition of students enrolled through counselling in engineering colleges. All of them had their doctoral degrees.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich qualitative data for the study. Several relevant literatures were consulted to focus on the themes and topics for designing questions. Some of the valuable works consulted include Kvale (1996), Cohen et al., (2018),

Nazari et al. (2021), Dale and Viethen (2021), and Zhao (2022). Semi-structured interviews allowed greater flexibility for expanding on short answers to quote examples where and when needed. Some of the guiding questions are presented below:

- What are some of the parameters you look for when you assess your students' oral presentations?
- When are you impressed and mark them up?
- What are some common mistakes that students make in their speeches that make you bring their scores down?

More probing questions were asked to elicit deeper and wider responses with examples. Prior to the interviews, an email was sent out to check their willingness to participate in the study, following which they were briefed about the objectives of the study and the data collection methods used. They were also provided with a consent form to sign to ensure research ethics and integrity.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis process involved several key steps to ensure a rigorous and comprehensive examination of the interview data. The first step in the analysis was to become thoroughly familiar with the data. This involved transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim and reading through the transcripts multiple times. The process allowed the researcher to immerse themselves in the data, gaining an initial sense of the key themes and patterns that emerged. The next step was to systematically code the data. Coding involved identifying meaningful segments of text and assigning labels to them that captured the essence of the data.

After the initial coding, the researcher grouped similar codes to form broader themes. These themes represented significant patterns across the data and were refined through an iterative process. The guiding questions—such as "What are some of the parameters you look for when you assess your students' oral presentations?"—helped shape the thematic framework. The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. This involved checking the coherence of the themes with the coded extracts and the entire data set. Themes were adjusted, combined, or discarded as necessary to achieve a cohesive and comprehensive thematic structure.

Once the themes were finalized, the researcher defined and named each theme to convey its essence. This step involved writing detailed descriptions for each theme, outlining its significance and the key aspects it encompassed. The final step in the data analysis process was to write the report. The researcher integrated the themes into a coherent narrative, supported by direct quotes from the interview transcripts to illustrate key points. This approach ensured that the participants' voices were authentically represented in the findings. Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher adhered to ethical guidelines to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews, and participants were briefed on the study's objectives and data collection methods. A consent form was provided to ensure research ethics and integrity.

By following these steps, the researcher systematically analyzed the rich qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews, uncovering important insights into the research topic.

Results and Discussion

Based on their responses, the results are displayed and discussed. The results are categorized into linguistic, paralinguistic, and nonlinguistic factors that influence speech evaluation. The data collected from multiple evaluators highlight key patterns and themes that emerged during the assessment process. The findings are organized into several sub-sections, each addressing a specific aspect of speech performance.

Research Question 1: How do college teachers rate the oral presentations of their learners at Tamilnadu College?

This research question relates to the college teachers' ratings of their learners' oral presentations. The analysis of these evaluations reveals key patterns and criteria educators utilize in assessing performance, shedding light on the underlying factors that influence their judgment. The table shows several key factors that influence the evaluation of speech in both linguistic and nonlinguistic domains. Fluency emerged as a critical factor, with pauses and fillers significantly impacting the perception of fluency. Evaluators preferred speech that flowed naturally, and penalized interruptions caused by pauses and fillers. Grammar also played a crucial role in the evaluation. A rich variety of sentence structures and minimal grammatical errors were necessary for higher scores. Evaluators were particularly intolerant of basic grammatical mistakes.

Vocabulary was another important factor, with a varied and appropriate use of vocabulary being rewarded, while overuse of common words and incorrect usage of advanced vocabulary led to lower marks. Proper collocations were essential for higher scores. Pronunciation and intonation were important aspects of speech delivery. Correct pronunciation and appropriate intonation contributed to higher scores, emphasizing the importance of these factors in effective communication.

Table 1. Linguistic Factors of Assessing Oral Presentation

Criterion	Evaluators' Feedback	Details	Illustrative Quotations
Fluency	Frequent pauses between sentences negatively impacted fluency, leading to lower marks. Smooth, continuous speech was highly valued. Interruptions in speech flow (e.g., "eh," "like") were penalized. Repetitive use of words or phrases detracted from fluency.	T1 and T2 highlighted minimizing pauses and fillers. T3 emphasized avoiding repetitive sentence patterns.	"Frequent pauses between sentences significantly negatively impacted fluency."
grammar	Variety and richness of sentence structures were emphasized. Repeated use of simple sentences was penalized. Common grammatical mistakes (incorrect reflexive pronouns, misuse of tenses) resulted in lower marks. Evaluators were intolerant of basic grammatical errors.	T1 and T4 focused on the appropriacy and complexity of grammatical structures. T2 was intolerant of basic errors.	"Common grammatical mistakes, such as incorrect reflexive pronouns and misuse of tenses, resulted in lower marks."
Vocabulary	Varied vocabulary was rewarded. Overuse of the same word or phrase was marked down. Words needed to be used correctly within context; misusing sophisticated words was penalized. Incorrect collocations (e.g., "thick coffee") were penalized.	T1 and T4 emphasized variety and appropriacy. T3 looked for a range of synonyms to demonstrate lexical richness.	"Misusing sophisticated words in an attempt to show off vocabulary was penalized."
Pronunciation	Incorrect pronunciation (e.g., "comBany" instead of "company") led to lower scores. Proper intonation was important for high marks. T1 was more tolerant of pronunciation errors.	T2 and T4 emphasized correct pronunciation and intonation.	"Incorrect pronunciation of words, such as saying 'comBany' instead of 'company,' led to lower scores."

Content was evaluated based on the relevance, strength, and development of ideas. Providing relevant examples and maintaining a logical order in the presentation were essential for higher scores. Nonlinguistic factors such as preparation, energy, passion, body language, and voice significantly influenced the evaluation. Well-prepared and passionate delivery, coupled with confident body language and clear voice, could enhance the overall perception of the speech.

T1 looked for pauses, variety in grammar and vocabulary, and the appropriacy of words. She also expected knowledge of collocations and was more tolerant of pronunciation errors. T1 was particularly focused on grammar and relevant ideas and their development in terms of content.

T2 also looked for pauses, fillers, and repetition of ideas concerning fluency. She wanted basic grammatical structures to be correct and was intolerant of errors. T2 also emphasized the importance of correct pronunciation and intonation.

T3 took into consideration pauses and fillers and was less tolerant of repetitive sentence patterns. He expected students to demonstrate a range of vocabulary by using various synonyms and looking for relevant ideas and examples to support those ideas.

T4 was watchful of pauses and expected higher-level grammatical structures and sentences free of errors in tenses. She emphasized the relevance and expansion of ideas in presentation and considered sincerity of preparation and voice to be important.

Pronunciation was deemed critical by only two teachers, who had zero tolerance for mispronunciations and emphasized the importance of proper intonation. Content evaluation prioritized the development of main ideas supported by relevant examples, ensuring logical progression without redundancy. Fluency expectations were consistent across all teachers, emphasizing smooth, continuous speech without frequent pauses or fillers.

Research Question 2: What are the specific criteria they consider worthwhile for assessing oral presentations of learners?

In response to the second research question, the specific criteria that college teachers consider while assessing their learners' oral presentations are recalled. The findings illuminate the various factors and benchmarks utilized by educators to evaluate performance, providing insights into the elements deemed essential for effective oral communication. As Table 2 shows, evaluators valued strong, relevant ideas and logical order in speeches (Content), rewarded sincere effort despite language difficulties (Sincerity of Preparation), emphasized the positive impact of high energy and passion (Energy and Passion), and noted the importance of clear voice and confident body language (body language & voice). Illustrative examples are provided to highlight specific aspects evaluated within each criterion.

With these findings, the study highlighted the multifaceted nature of speech evaluation, emphasizing the importance of linguistic, paralinguistic, and nonlinguistic factors in determining the overall effectiveness of a speech. The findings suggest that a holistic approach, considering all these factors, is necessary for a comprehensive evaluation of speech. The evaluators' focus on various aspects, such as fluency, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, content, preparation, energy, passion, body language, and voice, underscores the complexity of speech evaluation. A well-rounded and comprehensive assessment approach, considering these diverse factors, is crucial for accurately evaluating the quality and effectiveness of a speech.

The findings align with previous research on speaking assessment. For instance, Fulcher (2015) and Isaacs (2016) highlight the importance of effective oral communication for academic performance and job competence. Derwing and Munro (2009) and Isaacs (2013) emphasize the role of speaking skills in social integration and reducing language barriers. Trilling and Fadel (2009) also underscore the importance of oral presentation skills as part of 21st-century skills, which are expected even at entry-level positions in the workplace. The literature records challenges in assessing speaking skills. Likewise, paralinguistics and nonlinguistic factors are consistent with previous studies that have developed rubrics for oral presentation assessment (Bower et al., 2011; De Grez et al., 2009; Reitmeier & Vrchota, 2009).

Tools such as instructor assessment, peer assessment, and self-assessment are widely used in universities, with instructor assessment offering reliable feedback (Sterling, 2008). However, combined assessment strategies may provide more comprehensive feedback and learning opportunities (Ochy et al., 1999; Sterling, 2008).

Table 2. Paralinguistic Factors of Assessing Oral Presentation

Criterion	Evaluators' Feedback	Details	Illustrative Quotations
Content	Evaluators highly valued strong and relevant ideas, awarding higher marks for well-developed content. Providing sufficient examples and expanding on main ideas was also rewarded. It was essential for examples to be correct and relevant to the topic. Maintaining a logical order in the speech was crucial for higher scores.	T1, T3, and T4 highlighted relevance and development of ideas. T2 focused on topic relevance.	"Providing sufficient examples and expanding on main ideas was rewarded."
Sincerity of preparation	Inadequate preparation resulted in lower scores. Sincere effort, even from students with language difficulties, was sometimes rewarded.	T4 emphasized the importance of sincerity in preparation.	"Inadequate preparation resulted in lower scores."
Energy and passion	High energy and passion in delivery could compensate for minor grammatical mistakes.	T2 considered energy and passion significant nonlinguistic features.	"High energy and passion in delivery could compensate for minor grammatical mistakes."
Body language & voice	A clear and loud voice, along with confident body language, impressed evaluators and led to higher scores.	T3 focused on posture as a key paralinguistic feature. T4 emphasized the importance of voice.	"A clear and loud voice, along with confident body language, impressed evaluators."

The study also is in harmony with the study of Alshammari and Mugaddam (2023) in some ways. Alshammari and Mugaddam (2023) focused on the assessment of speaking skills among EFL learners. The researchers found that teachers considered various linguistic, nonlinguistic, and paralinguistic features when assessing speaking, but there was no uniform criterion for marking. This lack of consistency in assessment criteria can lead to subjective evaluations and potential biases in grading. In comparison, the current study on linguistic, nonlinguistic, and paralinguistic features in speaking assessment highlights the importance of these features in voice recognition and speaker identification.

The study emphasizes that multiple levels of linguistic and paralinguistic features contribute to voice recognition, including acoustic, phonological, lexical, and semantic information. Additionally, the study investigates the influence of dialectal variations on speech recognition and classification. Both studies underscore the significance of considering a comprehensive range of features in speaking assessment. However, while Alshammari and Mugaddam (2023) focus on the practical implications of inconsistent assessment criteria among teachers, the current study delves into the technical aspects of voice recognition and the role of various linguistic and paralinguistic features.

Conclusion

This study underscores the lack of consistent criteria among teachers when assessing speaking skills, revealing varied emphasis on linguistic, nonlinguistic, and paralinguistic features. The findings highlight the need for standardized rubric to reduce variability in judgments and improve the validity and reliability of assessments. While grammatical accuracy and vocabulary range were universally prioritized—aligning with the standards of tests such as IELTS and TOEFL—these exams overlook paralinguistic and affective elements that teachers deemed essential. The inclusion of subjective nonlinguistic factors, such as passion and energy, further complicates evaluations, potentially disadvantaging students whose performance is hindered by anxiety. To achieve fairness and precision in speaking assessments, it is crucial to establish clear, comprehensive criteria that integrate linguistic, paralinguistic, and nonlinguistic aspects, ensuring evaluations reflect the multifaceted nature of effective communication. Further research may explore teacher perspectives, cultural differences in assessment practices, anxiety's impact on speaking performance, and innovative methods to embed paralinguistic factors into standardized testing. These steps would ensure a holistic approach to evaluating oral presentation abilities.

Disclosure Statement:

We, the authors of this paper, hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. We take responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

Conflict of interest: We have no conflict of interest to declare.

Funding: None

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