

Poster Presentation as an Effective Communication Tool in an EFL Context

Anita Teresa Boggu

Majan University College, Oman
Ph.D Scholar, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

Dr. J. Sundar Singh

Karunya University, Coimbatore

Abstract

This article took shape based on an action research conducted in a business English classroom with poster presentation as a remedy to a traditional approach for assessing oral communication. Convenience sampling technique was applied by the researcher who handled the session for the students in an Institution in Oman. The aim was to motivate students and provide them with a real life experience that would enable them to see the benefit of interacting with a public audience. Past experiences of student presentation comprised of students presenting within the classroom with a small audience consisting of 5-6 members. Thus it was quite challenging to convince female students in Oman to present to a public audience. The activity helped students realize that effective poster presentations operate on multiple levels, as they were able to advertise, interpret, conduct surveys and research on the given topic. An experiential learning dimension was given to the whole process, by incorporating reflection on the task. The 'learning by doing activity' developed a sense of achievement and accomplishment and worked as a catalyst to stimulate active interaction between target groups. Poster presentations have the potential to be utilized as an effective tool of assessment combined with a fun element.

Keywords: Poster presentations, visual presentations, audience participation, skills development, preferences, experiential learning.

Introduction

Poster presentations are gaining importance in all fields of education. Effective posters offer visual research findings, as they express the learners' points in graphical terms. Poster presentation, thus, is an activity that encourages maximum interaction between target groups; hence it is highly preferred by most learners and adopted by educational practitioners worldwide. "Posters are a hybrid form—more detailed than a speech but less than a paper, more interactive than either" (Miller, 2007). Poster presentations are becoming a key instrument in disseminating research findings. As investigated by Ilic & Rowe, (2013) after extensive database searches, they Identified 51 studies on poster presentations that were executed in various fields of clinical/health topics.

In the literature on poster presentations, the relative importance of posters has been subject to considerable debate. However, very few studies have examined poster presentations in the EFL context. With reference to the Arabic culture, it has often been a neglected educational tool, since it demands students to face a public audience, which is very daunting for female students. The students for the present study belong to a business English course which basically prepares students in all four language skills to become competent users of the target language in the workplace. Maximum number of employers seeks candidates with good communications skills; however, it has been observed that out of the four language skills taught in an EFL classroom, speaking is given the least importance. In most of the foundation programmes in Oman, the language skills are not taught using an integrated approach, Mclean, (2011) stated that despite textbooks being designed to facilitate an integrated approach to language skills, the chapters are divided into separate language lessons, thus defeating the aim of an integrated language approach. This kind of approach rightly testifies the old saying, 'Jack of all trades and master of none. Al-Issa (2007) also had similar views on language teaching, specifically focusing on communication skills. He is of the view that the Omani curriculum fails in developing communication skills among learners as the course materials are deficit in activities that are authentic and communicative in nature.

Sharing the same concern as Al-Issa, Al-Mahrooqi (2012) questions the role of higher education institutions in delivering skilled graduates, suitable for the job market. Most learners graduate successfully, but are they fit for the workplace? Are they able to communicate effectively? She adds that students at the tertiary level display a sense of disappointment with regard to communication skills since they are not prepared to meet the requirements of the job market. There is a need to embed extensive oral language for civic and educational needs to obtain successful literacy development (Kinsella, 2006). The speaking aspect is often neglected by teachers due to fear of not completing the prescribed syllabus (McLean, 2011) or they dread a noisy class (Kinsella, 2006).

Traditional ways of assessing speaking expect learners to answer a few questions face to face in a formal setting with an interlocutor. Such oral presentations increase anxiety and result in low performance. Learners are required to identify the functional role of speaking the target language, which acts as a motivator to use the language. As stated by Burrell, Finch, Fisher, Rahim, & Dawson (2011) nowadays adult learners require hands on opportunities in the classroom to prepare them to meet the challenges at the workplace. With the intention of developing students to confidently communicate to an audience other than their classmates, poster presentations have been introduced. Poster presentations reach out to a wider audience and simultaneously allow learners put their speaking skills to use. (Horn, Kopser, & Carpenter, 1993)

Interaction brings about the development of speaking skills; it transforms the role of a learner from a passive listener to an active speaker, thus creating an active and purposeful learning environment. This paper describes the design and implementation of poster presentations in a business English course. It explores the student's attitudes and preferences and collates their reflections on the activity.

Review of literature

An effective way to bridge the gap between the classroom and the workplace requirement is to provide students with practical hands on experience. At the tertiary level, students bring with them rich experiences gained in social, domestic and academic settings. Experience combined with hands-on activities in the classroom, ensures deeper learning as compared to the traditional classroom activities (Van Eynde and Spencer, 1988; Specht and Sandlin, 1991; Kendrick, 1996, cited in (Montgomery & Millenbah, 2011).) As stated by Da Kolb (1995), "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (1984). Studies suggest that poster presentations employ an experiential learning approach towards learning. It develops cognitive, affective, social and physical skills that are necessary for a business (Baden & Parkes, 2013). Vujakovic cited in Chapman (2012), remarks that posters enable students to work independently and enhance their creative and research abilities. To maximize the effect of the learning by doing activity, it is imperative to encourage learners to contemplate on the activity in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses and ponder on ways to overcome their shortcomings. By integrating presentations with student feedback, there is a mutual benefit to the teacher and the learner.

The learner gains confidence communicating orally to a wider audience, while the teacher, with the input from students, improves the content to prepare students to face the competition in the workplace. Moutaga (2006), cited in Asassfeh, Khwaileh, Al-Shaboul, & Alshboul (2012), opines that language classrooms fail to provide learners opportunities to develop their communicative skills. The author furthermore reiterates that learners prefer a grammar-free environment to allow more interaction among peers and the teachers. Experience and learning are fundamental in the promoting sense of responsibility and autonomy in the learner.

Poster presentations satisfy the eight principles of good practice for all experiential learning activities laid down by the National Society for Experiential Education, (2013). According to NSEE, the facilitator plays a major role in ensuring that the principles of experiential education are fulfilled. Every experiential activity should endeavor to fulfill the eight principles; Intention, preparedness and planning, authenticity, reflection, orientation and training, monitoring and continuous improvement, assessment and evaluation and acknowledgement. The activity ensures that the experience is cyclic and completes the loop of the learning process. Burrell et al., (2011) support the view that opportunities that involve student involvement in the learning process prepare them to meet the needs of the future.

The process of poster presentation encompasses the four modes of experiential learning. It allows students to put theory into practice by reflecting on the process. Kolb states that learning is more meaningful and deep when it incorporates the four modes of experiential learning - experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting.

The poster presentation activity encourages learners to choose their products based on their experience, enables them to work collaboratively and reflect on the process and apply the skills thus learnt to their everyday situations in and out of the classroom. Likewise, D. E. Wolfe & Byrne, (1975) proposes four phases of experiential learning task structure: design, conduct, evaluation, and feedback. The 'design phase' sets the stage for the participants, 'conduct phase' involves effectively regulating the design, and 'evaluation phase' provides opportunities for participants to demonstrate their learning. The final stage is the 'feedback phase', where the activity is monitored throughout to identify the positive and negative features of the process. Both views place significant importance on the learner wherein the teacher is positioned as a facilitator, planning and selecting the activities that encourage participation and reflection on the process.

As cited in Bracher (1998) Handron(1994) states that poster presentations provide a platform for students to explore facts and understand concepts thus arousing their curiosity and boosting their motivation and enthusiasm, which is a form of an experiential learning activity. Miller (2007) asserts that researchers do not favor poster presentations over oral presentations; they often ignore the interactive aspect of posters. Contrary to the above view, Lane (2001) comments that according to the survey, poster presentations scores a significantly higher value compared to standard presentations. Supporting Handron's view, Knutson(n.d.) comments that a project or a task demands students to work collaboratively, which encompasses the stages of exposure, participation, internalization and dissemination, leading to a conducive learning environment. A poster presentation produces best results when it is accompanied with a brief explanation of the project. Poster presentations are termed as 'project based learning' by Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010 cited in (Bargad, Corsaro, & Mceneaney, 2014). It permits students to select their own projects, thus involving them in the decision making process. This encourages an informal discussion between the presenter and the viewer thus resulting in active learning(Ilic & Rowe, 2013) Cited in (Knutson, n.d.), Padgett (1994), Parks (2000), Spruck-Wrigley,(1998) are of the view that collaborative activities require students to devote maximum time, energy and effort to create a finished product. The skills gained through communicative activities contribute to the overall development of speaking skills and increase the learner's confidence in communicating fluently in the target language. Rief & M.A., (n.d.) claims that students retain:

- 10% of what they read
- 20% of what they hear
- 30% of what they see
- 50% of what they see and hear
- 70% of what they say
- 90% of what they say and do

The aim of every instructional activity is to achieve maximum retention of information. Poster presentation is an appropriate educational tool since it involves active learning and ensures retention. Roybark (2008) cited in (Saat, 2014) remarks that when instruction integrates student's presentations, it leads to active engagement and improved learning. Similar to Roybark (2008), studies conducted by Ilic & Rowe (2013) reveal that successful transfer of knowledge and behavior is observed when poster presentations are integrated into the educational system. Moreover, the authors stated that a traditional poster would not create active learning if it is not accompanied by face to face interaction with an intended audience. Akister, Bannon, & Mullender-Lock(2000), indicate posters as a pertinent tool that links theory to the practical aspect of the real world. Successful experiential learners develop into autonomous learners with skills that enable them to undertake responsibility to work alone or in a group(Moon, 1999). As cited in Chapman (2012), allowing students to choose their own topics develops self-direction and autonomy, thereby increasing their level of interest and reduces anxiety(Benson, 2001: Ford, 1999). It is seen that no matter what activity is planned, reflection and application play a vital role in ensuring deeper understanding of abstract concepts. Clark, Threeton, & Ewing (2010) state that in order to acquire deeper understanding, learning should not halt at the experience stage; if this occurs, then the learner is denied the chance to absorb or retain valuable knowledge gained through experience.

Experiential learning experiences help to complete students' preparation for their chosen careers which reinforce course content and theory. Students learn through student- rather than instructor-centered experiences by doing, discovering, reflecting and applying. Through these experiences students develop communication skills and self-confidence and strengthen their decision- making skills by responding to and solving real world problems and processes.

Research Methodology

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What is the student's preference towards a poster presentation?
2. Does poster presentation enhance language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking)?
3. What is the student's reaction towards the poster activity?
4. Will poster presentations increase student's confidence in speaking to an intended audience?
5. Does reflection on the process of a poster presentation make students aware of the necessary skills required for the workplace?

Method

The study population comprised of 60, Level 1, Semester 1, undergraduate students who were registered for various business pathways like accounting, marketing, finance, human resource and small business pathway. Out of the total subjects, 39 were females and 21 were males, belonging to the faculty of business.

The process involved a sequential order, where students were required to prepare and plan the product that they would sell. It could be a new invention or an existing product with additional features. The whole process comprised of selecting members of a group, brainstorming ideas on creating a new product, research on relevant information; design a power-point and a poster. Due to cultural limitations, students were given the option to choose members of their team consisting of two to three members of the same gender. It included a 2 minute question and answer session at the end of the presentation which was conducted in the classroom.

The pre-requisite for the product pitch was a poster displaying significant research on the product, the target company and a bibliography section, along with a conclusion based on the findings. To facilitate communication between team members, what's App group was created. Research activity included finding facts about the product, identifying the target company that they would pitch their product to, recognize the target customers, analyze trends in the sales of a particular product and read about effective ways of marketing and advertising their product. Most of the students managed to complete the whole process independently; however, some of them approached the lecturer for correction of grammatical errors and practice with pronunciation.

The poster was mandatory for assessment purpose; however participation in the poster competition was optional. The poster competition required students to interact with the audience which comprised of students from other faculties and staff members. The presentations were videotaped for the purpose of moderation of marks. After considerable amount of convincing that the recordings would be confidential, the female students gave their consent to be videotaped. Three weeks prior to the poster display, students were shown samples of academic posters and demo videos of pitching presentations to provide them with a valid context to relate to the experience. In addition, they were provided with handouts containing conversation gambits to support their literacy skills.

Lastly, students were asked to refine the information displayed on the poster by reflecting on it and rehearsing the presentation before they could face the intended audience. Since it was the first time students were asked to design posters, the rules were flexible and every effort was taken not to intimidate them by placing high expectations.

Questionnaires and interviews were the key data collecting tools utilized by students. This was a tool to collect student's reflection on the activity. The questionnaire was distributed within class time and collected by the respective lecturers; hence all questionnaires were duly filled in and returned. The sections of the questionnaire required respondents to provide feedback on the poster presentations that were conducted as a part of their product pitch presentations. It contained 18 items, respondents rated their responses on a 5 point Likert scale from strongly agree to strong disagree. Four broad themes emerged from the analysis; student's preferences, skills development, feelings or emotions and their opinions.

Findings and Discussions

1. What is the student's opinion/preference towards a poster presentation?

A comparison between the responses of male and female students was drawn.

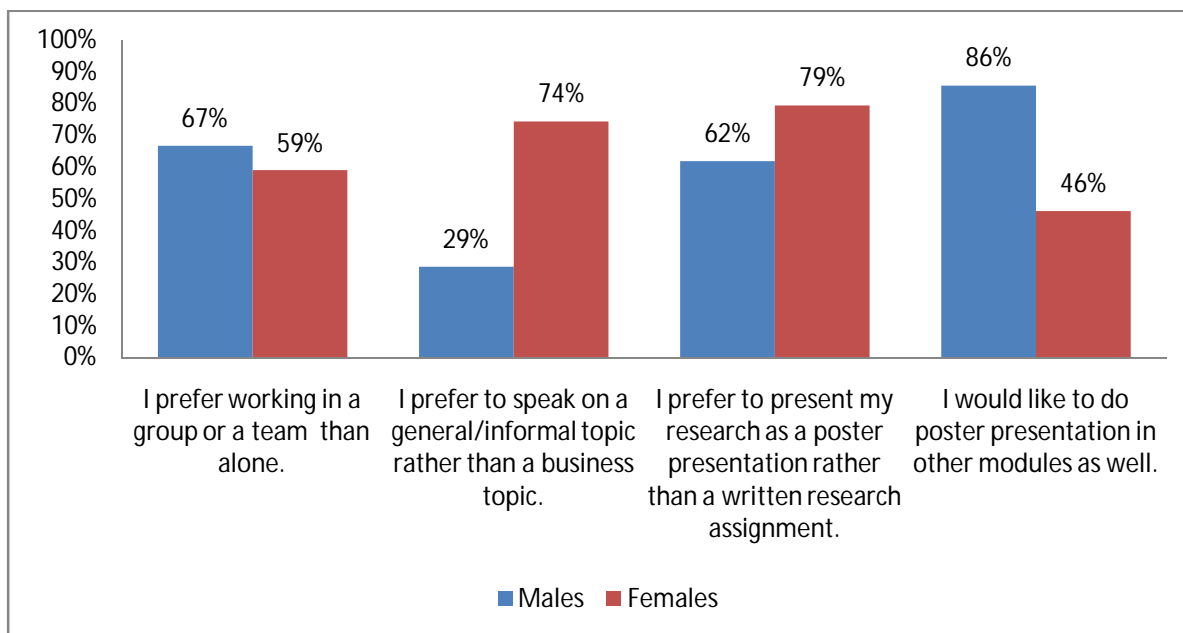


Fig:2- Preferences

Table.2

Preferences-Males/Females	Males		Females	
	Neutral	Disagreed	Neutral	Disagreed
I prefer working in a group or a team than alone.	5%	10%	21%	13%
I prefer to speak on a general/informal topic rather than a business topic.	33%	19%	15%	10%
I prefer to present my research as a poster presentation rather than a written research assignment	19%	5%	10%	15%
I would like to do poster presentation in other modules as well.	5%	0%	18%	36%

Fig 2, represents percentage of respondents who agreed and strongly agreed with the questions. For the purpose of graphical representation and to derive the total agreement, the likert scale indicators, 'strongly agree and agree' have been merged. As shown in Fig 1, despite females preferring a poster presentation to a written research assignment(79%), they resist activities that require them to work in groups(59%) or interact with audience(46%). This could be due to socio cultural limitations where the majority of women do not feel confident to socialize. It is surprising to note that the female students prefer to speak on a general topic rather than a business topic (74%), even though they had chosen the business pathway which involves working in socially active environment. According to Al-lawatia(2011), " Tradition and social norms also play a role in impeding Omani women from work". It stated that 25% females consider working outside not suitable with their social status in society.

On the contrary, it has been observed that males prefer to work in groups (67%), with a very low preference to speak on a general topic. They display an affinity to speak on a business oriented topic which is of relevance to them. It is obvious that the males enjoy interaction with the audience and indicate a high preference (86%) to participate in poster presentations in other modules. This clearly indicates that the males are socially active and enthusiastic to interact with an audience whereas Omani women are timid and prefer to work in a traditional employment sectors as stated in the 2010 population census.(as cited by Sawson Al Lawati)

Table 2, indicates the percentage of males and females who disagree (Strongly disagreed and disagreed merged) and the respondents who prefer to be neutral. It is apparent from this table that 36% females disagree with having poster presentations and 18% remain neutral, thus supporting the claim that females are restricted due to social norms (Sawsan Al-lawatia2011).

2. Does poster presentation enhance language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking)?

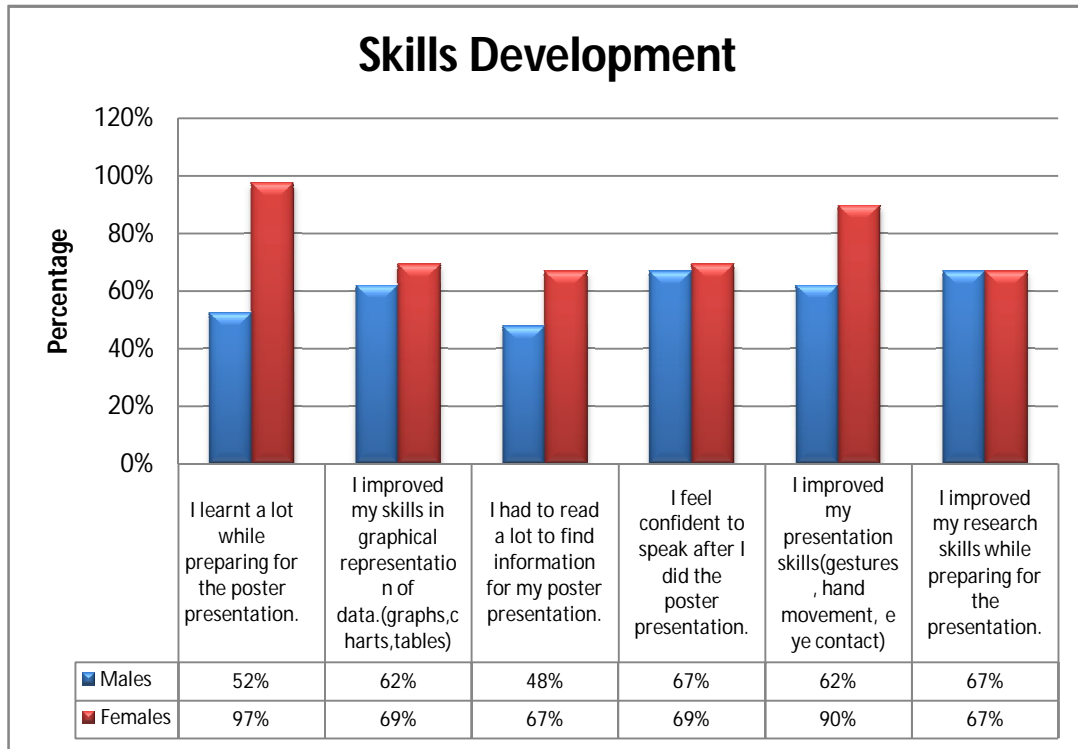


Fig.3-Skills Development

Table 3

Skills-Males/Females

		Males		Females	
		Neutral	Disagreed	Neutral	Disagreed
2	I learnt a lot while preparing for the poster presentation.	29%	5%	13%	8%
8	I improved my skills in graphical representation of data.	19%	5%	15%	13%
9	I had to read a lot to find information for my poster presentation.	29%	10%	18%	13%
10	I feel confident to speak after I did the poster presentation.	19%	0%	26%	5%
12	I improved my presentation skills (gestures, hand movement, eye contact)	14%	10%	5%	5%
13	I improved my research skills while preparing for the presentation.	19%	0%	26%	3%

Respondents were asked to indicate whether preparing for the poster led to the development of language and academic skills. As illustrated in Fig.2, the overall response to this section was very positive especially among the females. It was encouraging to note that 96% females, felt poster presentations benefitted them academically as compared to 52% of their male counterparts. Ranging between 62%-69%, both genders were of the view that there was an improvement in their graphical and academic skills, in addition to speaking and presentations skills. 67% females indicated that poster presentations require a lot of reading, as opposed to fewer than 50% males who sensed the need to read. Further supporting this uncertainty, 29% males preferred to remain neutral to this question as demonstrated in Table 3. Despite 69% females feeling confident to speak, 26% were neutral to this question. Supporting the development of skills through poster presentations, a study carried out by Pointon(n.d.) maintains that poster assessment produces graduates who are ‘multi literate’, who can identify and interpret meanings by designing posters, writing information, listening to the audience and expressing their views orally. A possible explanation for the low response of males could be the fact that at Level 1, there is a lack of seriousness towards academic performance, with an aim to just pass a module rather than to excel in certain skills. Overall, majority of females agreed that they had developed their skills by participating in the poster presentation.

3. What is the student’s reaction towards the poster activity?

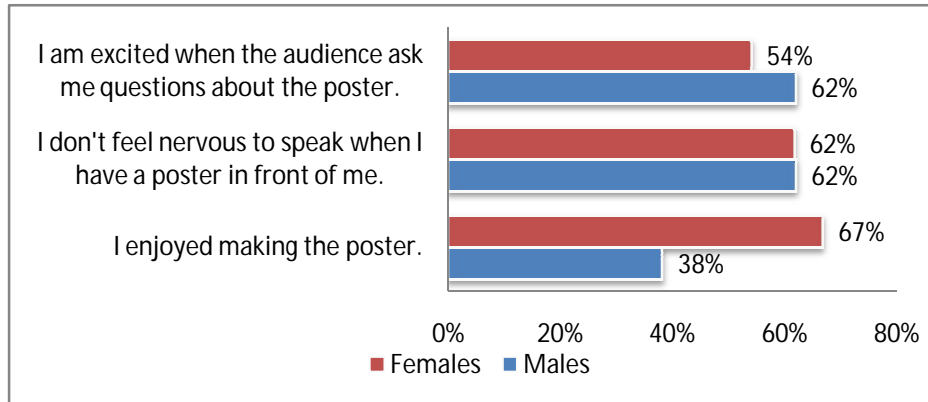


Fig.4 Feelings

Table 4

Feelings -Males/Females

Feelings	Males		Females	
	Neutral	Disagreed	Neutral	Disagreed
I enjoyed making the poster.	29%	10%	13%	13%
I don't feel nervous to speak when I have a poster in front of me.	10%	14%	13%	28%
I am excited when the audience asks me questions about the poster.	14%	0%	28%	21%

As shown in Figure 4, the male participants on the whole (62%) opined that the ‘look and say’ method reduced the stress of an oral presentation. The extrovert nature of the males is obvious in the results. The introvert nature of females is evident from Fig.3.About half of the total female population, state that they are comfortable with answering questions from the audience. According to a study carried out by A. M. Wolfe & College, (2006),students realize the significance of an oral presentation yet they are nervous while speaking. On the other hand, the males displayed an enthusiastic attitude (62%) and enjoyed socializing with the audience, with only 14%neutral response (see Table.4). Apparently, females were more creative in designing the posters (67%) and appreciated the ‘learning by doing’ activity with a minimum of 13% who disliked the activity.

Just over 50% of the total population of males and females are comfortable either with interacting with an audience or feeling confident with a poster to refer to for content. A possible explanation for this might be that since maximum audience consisted of students from other faculties (IT, Business and English) the presenters were within the comfort zone and therefore it reduced the possibilities of embarrassment.

5. Does reflection on the process of a poster presentation make students aware of the necessary skills required for the workplace?

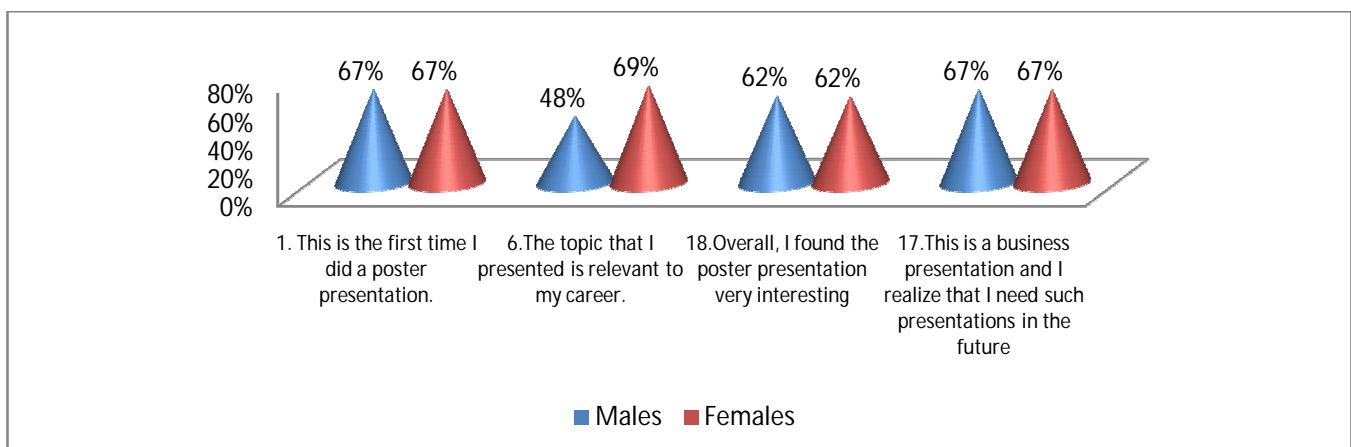


Fig.5-Awareness of the relevance of poster presentations in the workplace**Table 5**

Miscellaneous-Males/Females		Males		Females	
		Neutral	Disagreed	Neutral	Disagreed
1.	This is the first time I did a poster presentation.	14%	5%	15%	18%
6.	The topic that I presented is relevant to my career.	33%	10%	18%	21%
18.	Overall, I found the poster presentation very interesting	14%	10%	31%	8%
17.	This is a business presentation and I realize that I need such presentations in the future	14%	0%	26%	8%

The single most striking observation to emerge from the data comparison was the consistency in responses to 3 out of 4 questions. Both genders had similar percentage of responses for questions 1(67%), 18(62%). Above half of the total populations indicated that poster presentation was a new experience and they found the activity very interesting. This result may be explained by the fact that despite the amount of time and effort consumed by the poster presentation, students experienced a sense of achievement when they presented to an audience. From the data in Figure 5, question 17, it is apparent that both genders (67%) are aware that the presentation is relevant and imperative for training them to be successful in the workplace. In accordance with the present results, previous studies by A. M. Wolfe & College(2006) have demonstrated that 94.7% respondents indicate that oral presentations play a significant role in their academic experience as well as future careers(98.9%).

As seen in table 5, the most surprising aspect of the data is that 33% males remained neutral to the relevance of the business topic and 48 % males agree that the topic (selling products) is relevant to their career. It seems possible that these results are due to uncertainty or lack of knowledge among the males with regards to the requirements of the job market. On the other hand, almost 70% females (fig 5) indicate a positive response to the same question. They exhibited a responsible attitude regarding the relevance of the topic. Data from Fig.5, question 6, can be compared with the data in Fig.2 which shows that 74% females prefer to speak on a general topic. The findings are quite contradictory. Females do not prefer to speak on business topics, yet they realize the significance of the topic to their careers, whereas it is vice versa with the males.

This project was undertaken to evaluate the success of a poster presentation in a Business English classroom within an Arabic context. It proved to be a success with students preferring to do a poster presentation in other content modules as well. Overall, in comparison to the male students, women performed well in most of the activities. One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that female students enjoyed the poster activity despite feeling nervous of facing a public audience.

The study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of Omani women who have displayed significant development in the field of education, but constitute only 24.7 percent of the total Omani labor force (Work & Programme, 2010). This finding runs parallel to the results of the present study, where it is obvious that female students improve their language skills compared to their male counterparts, they are aware of the relevance of the given task to real life context, however due to social norms they do not prefer to work in a crowded environment. Al-lawatia (2011) rightly state that, 'women prefer to work in a female friendly environment'.

Conclusion

Taken together, these findings suggest that poster presentations promote effective communication skills which are vital for the 21st century learner. Although the process of developing a poster seemed to be a complex activity, it was observed that it apparently boosted the learner's self-esteem and increased confidence. Kolb's four-phase model of the learning process was put into practice through poster presentation. Consequently, the newly gained experience gave them the confidence to apply it to real life situations inside and outside the classroom. The success of the poster presentation was evaluated through the 'reflection' stage as suggested by (David Kolb, n.d.) and (Bracher, 1998). The reflection on the activity through student feedback clearly indicated that there was a holistic development in language skills and research skills. The interaction between students, faculty members, peers and their own instructors gave them a sense of achievement.

This project was crucial in the development of various skills like literacy skills, critical thinking, meta cognitive skills, research skills, oral communication skills and an overall development of the basic language skills which involved reading extensively on the topic, writing facts and describing statistical data, listening to and responding effectively to questions posed by the audience.

Adopting an integrated approach to speaking skills, incorporating poster presentations as part of the syllabus would ensure that we produce confident individuals who would be able to face the challenges of the workplace. As the study shows, the poster presentations have the potential of an effective experiential educational tool if implemented judiciously. As inferred from the analysis of the student feedback on poster presentations, maximum number of students clearly indicated that they enjoyed the activity and looked forward to having poster presentations in content modules as well. In one study conducted by Castiglia (2006), it was noted that 78% of all students claimed that they feel motivated to study 'when the subject is interesting and practical'. Thus the present study proved that the poster presentation is definitely one such activity that is enjoyable and relevant to the students future although it is time consuming. Further research into how experiential learning activities such as a poster presentation or several other experience/reflection based activities enhance student's motivation and autonomy would be a valuable contribution in developing employability skills.

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