
Introduction

This literature review aims to bring together sources of information, including empirical research, practice-based evidence and relevant theory that offer insights into how students develop their oral communication practices through their higher education (HE) experiences. As this is a broad area some delineation is necessary. Our particular focus will be on the current nature of oral communication and its assessment in HE, preparing and delivering presentations, speaking in seminars/discussion groups, intercultural communication and ensuring inclusivity when developing and assessing oral communication practices. As these aspects are inextricably interlinked we will also explore relationships between them. The review highlights strengths and weaknesses of current practices and explores approaches for making practice more effective, with the intention of providing a point of departure for the work of the LearnHigher Oral Communication Learning Area.

Defining Oral Communication and Oral Assessment in HE

A glance at a selection of module outlines and programme specifications indicates the array of HE learning and teaching activities that involve oral communication, including seminar and small group discussions, mock interviews, moots, role plays, group and individual oral presentations and project and dissertation vivas. Oral communication is considered to be a core aspect of employability (Knight and Yorke, 2006) and in recognition of its importance for university students and graduates all QAA (2006) subject benchmark statements also include, under transferable or non-subject specific skills, the need for students to be able to present information orally. Hughes and Large (1993) found that a number of students have a level of oral communication considerably discrepant from their written communication and argue that, if both written and oral forms of communication are required of students by employers, both should be developed through degree programmes and should contribute to the final degree class awarded.

Although written assessment forms overwhelmingly outnumber oral assessment forms within HE curricula, oral assessment has held a longstanding important role, particularly in professional education such as medicine and law (Joughin, 1998). Oral assessment might simply be defined as the process of assessing a person's oral presentation style and their ability to support their arguments/opinions effectively through the use of spoken communication. Oral assessment is often used as a tool for testing the knowledge of students in a way that allows assessors to probe and scrutinise students, for example through a viva, which they are otherwise unable to do through the use of exams and coursework.

Although there are many similarities in the oral assessment practices described in literature, Joughin and Collom (2003) observe three particular sources of variation; the inclusion or exclusion of a written paper combined with the oral presentation to comprise the overall grade, group or individual presentations, and the person/s judging the assessments. Joughin and Collom (2003) also identify four particular benefits of oral assessment; authenticity; promoting good learning; balancing and developing student strengths; countering plagiarism.

In *Dimensions of Oral Assessment* (1998) by Gordon Joughin, a more detailed account of the varying factors concerned with oral assessment are illustrated. He details six particular dimensions of oral assessment, based on his review of educational practices:

1. Primary Content Type

This refers to the particular skill or ability that is under scrutiny. Examples of such include the ability to demonstrate knowledge, communicate coherently and apply interview techniques.

2. Interaction

Whereas in some cases the student must compile and deliver a presentation and follow a rigid set of instructions with little or no interaction with the audience, in other instances the student is required to maintain a dialogue with his/her assessor/s. In the latter, assessors may probe into and challenge the knowledge attained by their students, thus testing the scope of their knowledge.

3. Authenticity

The authenticity of oral assessment is dependant on the context in which the assessment or presentation is taking place. Joughin (1998) describes the way in which in certain instances presentations are required to be carried out in the field of work that the students are aiming to find themselves in once qualified. On the other hand, the 'decontextualised' pole that Joughin (1998) describes reflects the lack of authenticity of the assessment, in that it is carried out "remote from the situation of professional practice," (Joughin, 1998: 372), often in the classroom.

4. Structure

The structure of the oral assessment refers to the way in which the presentation is organised. While the 'closed structure' approach is defined by a pre-set list of questions which are applicable to all students, the 'open structure' illustrates a loose flow of dialogue, questions and answers. In the latter, the assessor shapes their questions in accordance to the student's findings and the issues they raise or cover.

5. Examiners

Joughin (1998) compares the assessment of written work to that of oral presentations, stating that in the latter there is greater opportunity for alternative methods of assessment and evaluation. While in written assessment generally one or two assessors scrutinise the work of students and agree the overall grade, orally assessed presentations may more easily be viewed and critiqued by peers, by the students themselves, as well as by "teachers or others in a position of authority" (Joughin 1998: 374). For example, Church and Bull (1995) evaluate the involvement of employers in assessing students' presentations.

6. Orality

Orality refers to the extent to which the assessment is exclusively oral. Whilst in some cases the assessment criteria centres solely on a spoken presentation, at other times the assessment must be carried out alongside, or be centred on, a written or physical piece of work.

Recognition of these dimensions might lead to clearer understanding of the intended purpose of this form of assessment and better implementation. They offer a framework for designing oral assessments according to our intended learning outcomes, and enable

university teaching staff to evaluate how relevant to their practice published accounts of approaches to assessing oral communication might be.

Self and Peer Assessment:

There is a growing body of research around the benefits of self and peer assessment, giving rise to several opposing positions. With regard to the assessment of oral presentations, Magin and Helmore (2001) found that the reliability of summative assessment could be improved by combining teacher marks with the averaged marks obtained from multiple peer ratings. Hughes and Large (1993) found that individuals could make reasoned assessment of their peers independently of their own ability. Boud (1989), however, argues that student assessment is too unreliable to count for summative assessment. It is also claimed that if peer assessment is only used formatively students will not take it seriously (Swanson, 1991, cited in Magin and Helmore, 2001). Despite these criticisms peer and self assessment are thought to have many benefits including the following:

- To succeed in HE it is important that students understand assessment processes and peer marking and feeding back is a good way to achieve this (Bloxham and West, 2004).
- Self and peer assessment create stress but lead to improved student performance in summative tasks. To ensure success it is important to provide clear marking criteria and guidelines in applying it (Pope, 2005).
- Peer assessment is a valuable process for developing confidence and value judgment (MacAlpine, 1999).
- Peer assessment is considered by employers as an important skill (Hughes and Large, 1993).
- In addition, Habeshaw, Gibbs and Habeshaw (1993) make suggestions for involving students in the assessment process through peer and self assessment as well as by negotiating assignment titles and criteria.
- Cottrell (1999, 2003) offers students guidance and tools for self-assessing their progress as learners.

The issues surrounding oral assessment and its varying degree of effectiveness when evaluating the knowledge, understanding and specific skills demonstrated by students are numerous, as is further discussed in this paper.

Speaking up in Seminars

The ability of students to communicate orally, whether in formal presentations, seminars or informal conversations, varies from student to student. Exploring motivation for student participation, as well as reasons for their reluctance to speak in seminars offers valuable insights into why students may feel uncomfortable or less confident when presenting ideas to their peers or assessors. While some are keen to speak up and eager to voice their opinions in seminars, others are more reluctant or less motivated to do so. In this section we will explore literature which explains and accounts for reasons behind these differences, and briefly explore initiatives to overcome students' resistance and reluctance to voice their opinions.

Current Issues:

Numerous reasons why students may be reluctant to speak up in the classroom have been identified in literature. For instance, students may feel nervous at the thought of speaking out loud whilst in the presence of a large group (Turk, 1985; Cottrell, 1999;

Bryan, 2001; McCarthy and Hatcher, 2002). Petress refers to this as “Communication apprehension – a clinical fear of communicating with or in the presence of others” (Petress, 2001: 3). While the fear of speaking may prevent some students from speaking in seminars altogether, those that do sometimes find their nerves restrict them from adequately sharing their views and intelligence, resulting in an embarrassed, unconfident student who then promises him/herself never to speak up again. Students may feel fear at the possibility of embarrassing themselves and appearing foolish or saying the ‘wrong’ thing. As Turk illustrates,

“Were it not for nervousness, common sense and normal intelligence would ensure that most talks were interesting and well planned. But nervousness seems to disable common sense, and normal intelligence gets swamped by anxiety” (Turk, 1985: 100).

Other possible explanations which may deter students from speaking up include low self-esteem and self belief (students may convince themselves they have nothing of value to contribute to class discussions), the fear of being ridiculed, (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999; Petress, 2001) and wanting to avoid conflict potentially created by expressing their own opinions (Petress, 2001). Lack of confidence in presenting and talking to an audience could also be attributed to a lack of familiarity with the content of the topic at hand (Drew and Bingham, 2001).

Some researchers, rather than focusing on general explanations behind the reluctance and lack of participation from students, lean towards wider socio-political and cultural impacts on student participation. For example, Johnson-Bailey (2002) argues that race impacts greatly on the level of participation and confidence of students when preparing for and delivering an oral presentation. Her research suggests that dividing factors, such as race, class and gender continue to segregate members of society, including in educational contexts. Johnson-Bailey’s findings suggest that the impact of dividing factors such as race can be seen to manifest themselves in two main ways – first through the structuring of social spheres (the groups most likely to generate the maximum amount of revenue will receive the highest priority by those in power) and also internally. In the latter, Johnson-Bailey’s arguments suggest that, in the particular case of educational institutions, race impacts on both learning and teaching styles. She finds that race greatly influences the perception, thought-patterns, confidence and comfort of both teachers and learners, and that power dynamics within the classroom are largely governed by views and beliefs regarding race. Johnson-Bailey reviews similar research which concludes that the reluctance of students to participate in oral communication in the classroom is largely due to these power dynamics:

“Analysis revealed that White male students experienced a higher degree of comfort when they were free to talk without being checked and when they were called on to serve as group leaders. In environments where power issues were not regulated by the instructor, the White males were permitted to claim their culturally ascribed power roles of leadership” (Johnson-Bailey, 2002: 44).

As illustrated above, she found that in the research she cited white students felt greater comfort in assuming leadership roles within groups, with ‘disenfranchised’ students feeling the opposite when power dynamics were left unmonitored. The following quote further illustrates this:

“Black learners felt that they were allowed to thrive when the teacher monitored who talked in class and ensured that there was ample communication space for all students” (Johnson-Bailey, 2002: 45).

Therefore, according to Johnson-Bailey, race has a significant impact on the willingness of students to speak up and participate in seminars, and helps to determine their levels of confidence when doing so.

Johnson-Bailey’s argument has resonance with Bourdieu’s concepts of *cultural* and *social capital* which offer insights into the impact of culture on learning. Bourdieu pioneered the concept of *habitus*, which is further described by Kirby *et al*:

“This term refers to the actual means by which people produce and reproduce social circumstances. In particular, Bourdieu wishes the term to refer to the way in which certain forms of behaviour become so internalised that they appear almost automatically...The knowledge gained from living in a particular culture or subculture in a sense predisposes the choices that we will make...” (Kirby *et al*, 2000: 654)

Similar to the argument raised by Johnson-Bailey, Bourdieu’s concepts of *cultural* and *social capital*, can be used to account for the varying levels of oral capability and willingness to speak between students when they enter higher education. Approaches and attitudes towards both teaching and learning are likely to be shaped by the cultural background and previous educational experiences of an individual. Therefore, both oral competency and the reluctance (or eagerness) to speak up in seminars and oral presentations may be linked to the culture or class they belong to, as well as the racial background, as illustrated by Johnson-Bailey. Some students may need more support than others in finding and developing their voice.

Strategies:

Given the principle issues, strategies for supporting and developing students should therefore focus on reducing the fear of speaking and enabling them to develop the necessary cultural and social capital to operate successfully in the HE environment.

Building up gradually:

The fear and anxiety expressed by students towards public speaking is recognised by Hay (1994), who recommends the implementation of short presentations throughout a university course, which can gradually build confidence and allow students to become familiar with presenting orally. Hay suggests first easing students into the task of presenting with short and informal presentations, then gradually building up the student’s oral skills and confidence by implementing group work and perhaps a formal presentation as a ‘grand finale’. In this way, rather than suddenly facing the daunting task of a formal and assessed oral presentation with little or no previous experience, students are able to familiarise themselves with the task and improve on the quality of their presentation techniques over a period of time.

Similarly, Exley and Dennick (2005), advocates of lifelong and collaborative learning, suggest icebreakers and warm-ups as a way of easing students into participation, and involving shy or reluctant speakers by adopting an inclusive approach, perhaps by asking directly for their opinion. Though others are wary of putting individuals on the spot and

requiring them to contribute to dialogue that they may not feel comfortable with (Ellsworth, 1992). Guidance is available to seminar leaders and lecturers to help them encourage and facilitate student participation. These include a resource developed by Stanford University (available at: http://ctl.stanford.edu/handouts/PDF/get_students_talking.pdf), and 'Teaching Tips' developed by Griffith University, (available at: http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/qihe/griffith_graduate/toolkit/oral/teach.htm). Authors such as Brookfield and Preskill (1999) also provide advice to teachers to help their students overcome difficulty with expressing their ideas through discussion, and explore topics such as the *benefits of discussion*, *discussion in culturally diverse classrooms*, *discussing across gender differences* and *keeping teachers' voice in balance*.

Deconstruction of taken for granted practice and self-help:

A course generally begins with an introduction to the expectations of participants and what they can expect from the course. This conversation should be extended to expectations round participation in class discussion, possibly with the negotiation of ground rules (Habeshaw, Gibbs and Habeshaw, 1992). Learning development resources and self-help guides designed to encourage students to participate more actively in discussion etc. can be beneficially recommended to students by university teachers. This serves to acknowledge that articulating and communicating your ideas and opinions orally is a difficult and complex skill that can only be developed through practice. Indeed, it is one of the "taken for granted" (Burke and Hermerschmidt, 2005:349) academic practices that students are often assumed to understand. In fact, on arrival, most are unfamiliar with, and uncertain of, the purpose of a *seminar*. Handbooks such as those by Cottrell (1999) provide advice on overcoming nervousness. *Seminars, Group Tutorials and Meetings*, from the Student SkillPack by Drew and Bingham (2001), for example, is designed for students preparing to take part in situations in which they are required to talk with people whilst on their course, such as in seminars. Beginning by introducing the purpose of seminars and group tutorials, they provide helpful hints on ways to overcome nervousness and become more involved in discussions. They encourage the adoption of an ongoing reflective and self-reflective approaches to aspects such as how you and others behave during discussions. *Getting the most out of Brunel Seminars* (Smith, 2005, available at: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/488/BOLD_externalpages/No3Seminars.pdf) encourages student to take a strategic and reflective approach to monitoring their progress in learning from and contributing to seminars. Stott, Young and Bryan (2001) go beyond providing tips for speaking and offer readers a contextual background and practical techniques of argumentation and rhetoric for conveying your point and persuading audiences.

Encouraging questions:

Asking and answering questions is an important mechanism for learning and a central orally-based activity in teaching sessions. However, many students are reluctant to pose or respond to questions orally in front of a whole class, preferring to ask 'private' questions after class, use discussion boards and/or question boxes. With this issue in consideration, through a research project conducted collaboratively between Brunel University and Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal, Watts (2007) sought to:

1. "Explore learners' 'questioning styles' and approaches to asking questions;
2. Develop 'teaching for questioning' to encourage question-asking and to build this into the fabric of sessions and course provision."

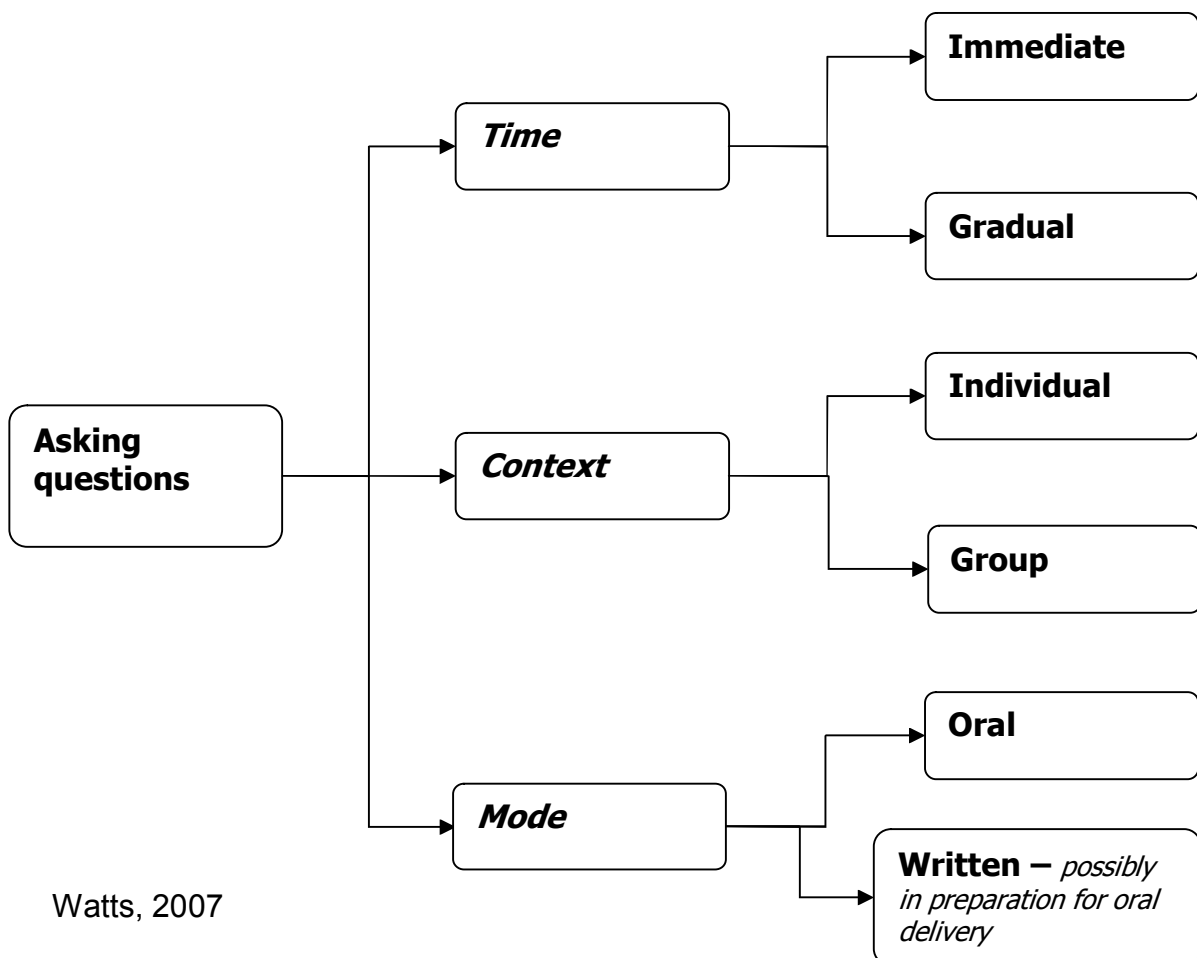
Watts (2007) offered explanations as to why students don't ask questions, which can be summarised as follows:

- learners *do* have questions but often avoid asking them
- they fail to be stimulated to ask questions
- “conceptual avoidance (the Ostrich Principal) (the Construction of Ignorance)”
- the design of teaching and learning can limit and inhibit student questions
- they may experience feelings of social exposure and vulnerability
- the nature of the subject area can impact on question asking

Watts (2007) observed that “the major obstacle for oral questions is not the teacher, but class peers” as the following quote suggests:

“Sometimes I want to ask something... but I don't feel comfortable to ask... because I know that they will all look at me... but if there are already other colleagues asking... it is easier... it starts to get usual... and people will not look at me, because I am just doing what everyone does... for example, if I ask a question during a lecture... that is not normal, so everyone will look at me, but if I raise a question during a tutorial... now everyone asks... so it's ok... it's normal...” (Catarina)

The quote also reveals that if question asking is seen to be a ‘normal’ activity students will feel more confident about engaging. Watts (2007) identified several modes of question asking, which, when used in different combinations, can promote student participation.



Based on this research project's findings Watts (2007) drew a number of conclusions:

- “it is clearly possible to create a ‘questioning environment’ where asking questions (and receiving answers) becomes an integral part of everyday transactions between teachers and students
- different strategies, such as group-based mini-projects, can promote questioning during sessions and enhance, more than others, the students’ ‘spirit of enquiry’
- teacher-centred strategies, such as standard lectures, do not easily motivate students to question during the class
- students need time and encouragement to ask higher level (higher quality) questions
- it is clearly possible to assess question asking and answering against explicit criteria
- students need explicit formative guidance on the quality of their questions during routine teaching sessions
- students need explicit guidance and practice in the writing of questions for formative assessment purposes
- to do so is to encourage the asking of higher level, higher quality questions which reflect conceptual clarity and critical thinking”

Further exploration:

As already indicated, there is some research that explores why students might not speak and why they might be silenced; however this does not tend to be from the perspective of the silenced themselves. Through the LearnHigher project we aim to explore the experiences of those who do not participate and remain peripheral, but one challenge is getting them to speak about it! This will be explored further under intercultural communication.

Preparing and Delivering Oral Presentations

Strategies:

It is widely recognised that in recent years the HE sector, including HEIs in Britain, America and Australia, have sought to engender a more student-centred approach to learning and teaching, rather than the traditional, often didactic, teacher-led approach. With regard to oral communication, this has meant that a substantial amount of literature has been developed for use by students to help develop their oral presentation practices. This section offers an overview of techniques and resources available to students (and their teachers) to help them effectively prepare and deliver oral presentations. Preparing and delivering an oral presentation is generally considered in terms of a series of steps to be taken which we have reflected in the presentation of guidance below.

Identify purpose/objective:

Like any academic project, before conducting oral presentations students must prepare and plan for it. Study guides and skill packs encourage students to do this. Young (1998) and Drew and Bingham (2001), for example, emphasise the need to identify the objective of the presentation, allowing reflection on its purpose, aim and eventual outcome. If working in a group, at this point it may be useful to negotiate and allocate responsibilities between group members (Drew and Bingham, 2001). Next, “the students must be sure that they are familiar with the background of the information they discuss...” (Eisen, 1998: 4). In order to ensure students are familiar with the background and any current issues

concerning the topic of their presentation, they are encouraged to carry out research by using textbooks, TV/films on the subject, the internet and other media (Drew and Bingham, 2001; Eisen, 1998).

Consider your audience:

Levin and Topping (2006) suggest that consideration of the audience is vital when preparing for an oral presentation. They provide five key questions which aim to guide students on the content of their presentation, depending on their audience:

1. *Who will be the audience, and why will they be there?*
2. *Why does your audience need **this** presentation, about **this** subject?*
3. *What does your audience already know?*
4. *What kind of energy, on your part, will be appropriate to your audience?*
5. *What 'protocols' will you be expected to follow?*

(Levin and Topping, 2006: 36)

Organise the structure:

Once these questions have been answered, students are encouraged to structure their presentations in a clear and coherent manner (Cottrell, 1999; Bryan, 2001; McCarthy and Hatcher, 2002; Levin and Topping, 2006). Blundel (2004) introduces the concept of rhetoric and identifies the ingredients that make a presentation persuasive and convincing; ethos, logos and pathos. Here, the use of signposting is recommended, as it should "help the audience to know 'where they are' from moment to moment, and 'where they are going'" (Levin and Topping, 2006: 60). Levin and Topping quote a popular method which simplifies the process that a successful presentation must adopt:

1. Tell them what you're going to tell them.
2. Then tell them.
3. Then tell them what you've told them.

(Levin and Topping, 2006: 59)

In dedicating a chapter to 'Intonation and variety' Turk (1985) reminds us that audiences have attention spans of no longer than five to ten minutes before they begin to lose focus on the topic of discussion.

Design visual aids:

Preparation for presentations should also involve consideration and design of any handouts and visual aids which may be useful for the audience (Turk, 1985; Bryan, 2001; McCarthy and Hatcher, 2002; Levin and Topping, 2006). As Turk (1985) illustrates:

"Even the simplest visual aid can provide a grasp of the structure and direction of the argument, which will help the listeners to understand and remember" (Turk, 1985: 182).

Bryan (2001) adds to this, stating:

"Visual material is often what stays in people's minds for longest after a presentation" (Bryan, 2001:120).

In addition, Levin and Topping (2006) highlight the fact that images and symbols can convey messages and information which, if spoken, would take longer to explain and

digest. The same is said for handouts, which they describe as being, “photocopies or printouts of salient information given to listeners for them to take away at the end...” (Levin and Topping, 2006: 74). They underline the main types of visual aids as being a whiteboard, flipchart, overhead projector (OHP), PowerPoint, and video (Levin and Topping, 2006: 65), and describe the advantages of using both visual aids and handouts. Bryan (2001) also provides do’s and don’ts for using visual aids. The Open University’s Learning Space offers an extensive section on developing and using visuals when giving oral presentations (available at: <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1534>).

Rehearsing:

Prior to the actual ‘performance’ rehearsing the presentation is advised (Turk, 1985; McCarthy and Hatcher, 2002; Levin and Topping, 2006). McCarthy and Hatcher (2002) describe the usefulness of recording the presentation in an audio format, correcting mistakes or amending material or behaviour before video-recording it in order to further critically assess one’s own performance. Turk (1985), on the other hand, highlights the advantage of using a close personal friend to ‘try out’ the presentation, as they are more likely to be honest and correct in their evaluation than the presenter will be of themselves. Rehearsing the presentation provides a good opportunity to assess and practice timekeeping skills, effective body language, such as eye contact and hand gestures, voice projection (or the lack of) and content (Young, 1998; McCarthy and Hatcher, 2002; Murray, 2003; Levin and Topping, 2006). Levin and Topping (2006) offer techniques for developing the voice, the presenters most valuable tool, including enunciation exercises and ideas for experimenting with different tones. Bryan (2001) offers useful tips in relation to voice control, pausing and repetition and McCarthy and Hatcher (2002) also provide their readers with questions concerning volume, emphasis, rhythm, pace, pitch, etc. which speakers could consider and reflect upon before or even during their presentation.

Overcoming nerves:

As recognised earlier in this literature review, nervousness and stress may hinder one’s ability to present an oral presentation to the best of their ability. For this reason, many writers have stressed the importance of practising relaxation techniques, or adopting other approaches to ensure presenters are calm and focussed before presenting (Turk, 1985; Bryan, 2001; McCarthy and Hatcher; 2002; Levin and Topping, 2006). Bryan (2001) for example, provides guidelines for students to follow before presenting, which include visualising yourself performing well, taking deep breaths, clearing your mind as a way of relaxing, and releasing tension through isometric exercises (Bryan, 2001: 114-5). Levin and Topping (2006) recommend techniques which are more orientated towards realising a positive mental attitude, focusing on self appreciation and gaining a positive outlook towards the work you have accomplished, while McCarthy and Hatcher (2002: 50-142) give details of specific physical exercises to aid relaxation and breathing.

Considering non-verbal communication:

The effective use of body language during an oral presentation is central to guidance for presenters. Bryan (2001), for instance, agrees that it is a form of non-verbal communication, and states:

“Poise affects your self-confidence. If you look confident, you portray authority” (Bryan, 2001: 115).

She identifies particular gestures which help convey messages of authority, confidence, and trust, such as open arm gestures and finger movements (to count point 1,2,3, for

example). Similarly, McCarthy and Hatcher, dedicate an entire chapter to 'Using non-verbal language' (2002: 107-134), discussing non-verbal communication behaviours which portray confidence, such as posture. Turk also dedicates a chapter to 'Non-verbal communication' (1985: 145-166), and advises consideration of factors such as dress signals, maintaining eye contact with the audience and hand gestures.

Handling Questions:

Finally, presenters are advised to include a question-and-answer session at the end of their presentation to help clarify points, as well as providing the audience with a chance to test the knowledge of the speaker (Turk, 1985; Young, 1998; McCarthy and Hatcher, 2002; Levin and Topping, 2006). While Levin and Topping (2006) give their readers advice on how best to manage the session, McCarthy and Hatcher (2002) give tips on how to handle questions when they are asked.

In addition to the literature available to students to help them in their preparation and delivery for an oral presentation, resources are available from many higher education institutions, such as the *Oral Communication Skills* page found on the Brunel University website (available at: <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/life/study/ltdu/bold/oralcommunication>).

Area for exploration:

Through the LearnHigher project we are exploring how students prepare for their presentations and how they feel about the experience. Findings from a preliminary research project at Brunel in 2005/06 (Smith, 2006) found that students believed that their concerns about presenting could be reduced through the following changes:

- Expectations - "Provide a clearer marking scheme and outline prior to preparation"
- Support - "Have technical support"
- Consistency - "Make it constant across the board, or highlight how many people we would be presenting to"
- Timing – "Give a week's rehearsal [time] this side of the Xmas holidays"
- Group Assessment - "reduce the grade of the person who is not pulling their weight!"
- 2nd language speakers – "reassure people they will not get marked down", "take into consideration students that cannot speak English very well"
- Over-dependency? - "check presentation a number of times"

Their suggestions for improvements can be summarised under the following themes:

Preparation and expectations:

- "Advice from tutors should be more standardised"
- "What was expected, and what needed to be done for a good grade"
- "you can't expect a group of 8 to be able to make a 20 min presentation and expect each person to be able to say something significant"

Assessment and feedback:

- "If there is more percentage (about 50%) of the final grade, people will work harder on it"
- "would have been good to receive written feedback, not just a grade"

Environment:

- “The staff viewing the presentation looked disinterested, which was an annoyance”
- “giving lecturers an opportunity to assess the presentation in a relaxed environment”

We are building on this exploratory research to gain better insights and make further suggestions for enhancing teaching and learning practice accordingly.

Intercultural Communication

Given the increasing diversity of our student population in terms of growing international participation and the increasingly multicultural nature of home students, intercultural communication is a key aspect when exploring oral communication practices in higher education, both for the challenges and opportunities that it brings.

Current Issues:

Language – Difficulties Facing Non-native Speakers:

Understandably, as various authors (Habeshaw *et al*, 1998; Sander *et al*, 2000) point out oral assessment can be a daunting task for many students. For international students, however, the task may be perceived as particularly intimidating, especially for those for whom English is not their first language. For these non-native English-speaking students, the mere thought of presenting in front of their peers and assessors is approached with insecurity, often resulting in crises in confidence and increased levels of tension (Adams, 2004; Cathcart *et al*, 2006). A study conducted by Adams (2004) highlighted low self-efficacy levels amongst international students, in terms of their ability to adequately deliver an oral presentation. Adams (2004) suggests that in order to increase self-efficacy international students might watch video footage of a comparable international student presenting, rather than focus on ‘performances’ by native speaking professionals. She argues that using peer performance modelling is an effective way to enhance self-efficacy as learners are closer to their peer’s performance, which they see is acceptable, and more able to adopt similar linguistic strategies (Bandura, 1993). Clearly, the ability to speak English creates additional pressure for these students in assessed situations.

Studies such as those by Cathcart *et al* (2006) and Adams (2004) reveal that in terms of oral presentations, students are much more confident with the content of the presentation than they are with their ability to effectively utilise the English language to convey their arguments and ideas. Adams (2004) found that many of the international students who took part in her study believed that “their pronunciation and grammar weaknesses might cause the audience to lose concentration” (Adams, 2004: 122). Moreover, international students often struggle with interpreting comments or questions by assessors or peers, again adding to the low levels of confidence and self belief that many international students share in relation to oral communication (Cathcart *et al*, 2006).

Arguably more of a hindrance than technical linguist ability (or inability), is the impact of frustration, on the part of the non-native speaker at their relative incompetence in a second language, and negative assumptions made by others based on language difference, as is illustrated by the following quotes:

“I used to suffer from my own double perception of myself - the mature, socially functioning person in my native language and the incompetent non-communicator in the target language” (Nagata, 1999:18).

“Well it makes it difficult to explain ourselves to other members...I cannot express myself completely. Words are not translated as effectively as I think I can in my native language, that’s the problem.” (Smith, 2007: tbc)

Linguistic difficulties are also often conveniently, but perhaps mistakenly, cited by lecturers as hindering international students’ academic success and social integration (Trice, 2003) and identified by home students as contributing to their reluctance to interact (Volet and Ang, 1998). This lack of integration not only reduces the motivation of second language speakers to develop the target language (Dörnyei, 2003), it also prevents all students from developing valuable intercultural communication skills (Hellmundt *et al*, 1998).

Given the interest in internationalisation, there is a growing body of literature exploring the barriers to intercultural learning, including around communication and approaches to better foster it (Johnson, 1997; Volet and Ang, 1998; De Vita, 2000; Cathcart *et al*, 2006). Unexplored cultural differences between international students, such as the South-east Asian student population, and their native-English counterparts, and resulting stereotypes often makes it difficult for students to relate to one another (UKCOSA, 2005), as the following quote illustrates:

“Tell us how to mix with UK people properly...because in fact there’s lots of barriers to get close to them. Sometimes UK students underestimate international students’ capabilities, and it’s hard to work in a group” (International student, UKCOSA, 2004:67).

The situation is exacerbated when such lack of integration is ignored or masked by “the rhetoric of education internationalisation” (De Vita, 2005: 75). Styles of learning and teaching, previous experiences and expectations around participating in class and group work may vary, leading to perceived difficulty, or breakdown in working together as a cohesive whole. Cathcart *et al* (2006) found that UK students felt a degree of resentment towards their foreign counterparts, due to their belief that they were having to contribute more to group work because they were much better able to communicate and understand English. The following quote better illustrates this:

“This perception of free-riding led to frustration and anger from UK students in particular and...these feelings led to lack of motivation and performance” (Cathcart *et al*, 2006: 18).

Conversely they found that international students assumed that they would receive more support from their British counterparts who knew the system, and were disappointed when they did not. Cathcart *et al* (2006) also state that as tension mounted within the cross-cultural groups, some international students felt that their efforts were under-appreciated. This resulted in a lack of effort from both sides to contribute and participate to their full ability. Consequently, non-native students increasingly withdrew from group work, allowing the native students to take the lead.

In relation to this, Volet and Ang (1998) highlight that, importantly, although international students are tested on their reading and writing abilities before being allowed to enter into

a study programme in Australia, this test does not measure or assess students' skills of orality, as is illustrated below:

“While this may be a reasonably good test of reading and writing skills, it may not be accurate in measuring their aural comprehension skills and their ability to express their ideas in class and in informal social encounters” (Volet and Ang, 1998:12).

Cathcart *et al* (2006) revealed a similar finding in a British university. Although the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), required for entry into most UK HEIs, does test oral competency some students may have taken this some time prior to arrival and not have practised speaking in the meantime. This, combined with widely varying cultural expectations and conventions around who speaks in the classroom, means that in some cases international students may enter into educational programmes in international HEIs with more variable levels of oral competency than written competency, which should be taken into account when designing oral development opportunities and assessment.

In terms of communication for friendships, the ability for international students to communicate in an 'acceptable' manner and therefore make friends with their native peers is made difficult with the language barrier that divides them. Holliday, Hyde and Kullman state,

“Language is a bridge between people, but it is also a wall which divides people” (Holliday, Hyde and Kullman, 2004: 184).

This was evident when Cathcart *et al* (2006) found that, compared with their non-native classmates, English students were more interested in gaining greater cultural insight and succeeding in their group project, than they were with befriending the international students they were working with. This was largely due to the preconceived language barrier and difficulty in understanding one another. Similarly, Volet and Ang (1998) found that several local students in their study had trouble understanding their Asian counterparts, and, in addition, international students admitted they too had difficulty in understanding the Australian accent. While Volet and Ang (1998) recognise the possible struggle for understanding as a result of language barriers, they also reflect upon the extent to which communication and understanding is hindered by attitudinal, rather than language, barriers:

“A major question is the extent to which communication problems are real or whether they are impeded by a lack of goodwill – from either side – to make an effort to understand each other and to tolerate a degree of broken English” (Volet and Ang, 1998: 13).

Cultural Differences:

Moving beyond language competency, cultural differences also impact on a variety of factors around oral communication learning that we often take for granted. In her paper titled *Cultural Norms Affect Oral Communication in the Classroom* (1997) Johnson highlights the danger of “underestimating students' intellectual abilities and learning levels” if the cultural background of the specific student is not taken into account (Johnson, 1997:47). She addresses the fact that language is far more complex than the mere use of vocabulary, and is very much concerned with the cultural norms that people live and abide

by. These norms include "...acceptable amounts of talk, volume of speech, turn-taking processes, and pauses between speakers" (Johnson 1997: 47).

The situation is exacerbated because notions of accepted oral communication practices in some countries, such as the UK, are contradictory to the communication/learning practices of other countries (De Vita, 2000; Johnson, 1997). Based on the authors' experience of working with students and staff to improve assessment of oral communication, it seems that notions of oral competence and the extent to which students are able to successfully convey their knowledge/understanding/opinions create confusion and concern because of subjectivity and the culturally specific nature of criteria used to assess effective oral communication. Johnson (1997) therefore reminds her readers that whilst in our culture "fluency and talkativeness are seen as indicators of intelligence..." (Johnson, 1997: 49), in other parts of the world it is seen as self indulgent to express your own views out loud, perhaps undermining the role and power of the teacher, due to his or her status, age etc. Therefore, when faced with the task of delivering an oral presentation, it is quite understandable that students from different cultural backgrounds are reluctant and afraid of being 'thrown into the deep end' into uncharted territory.

A study conducted by Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) which focused on written communication also discussed the impact of culture on learning. Results from their study revealed the difficulty for some students to think and write critically, as some of them had come from a politically authoritative country in which criticism is seen as a form of subversion. This could help to explain why some students are unwilling to be outspoken when working in groups or taking part in an oral presentation. Furthermore, Cathcart *et al's* study (2006) revealed that international students preferred to allow others to lead them when organising and conducting an oral assessment.

Strategies:

Challenging stereotypes:

Research suggests that a major difficulty that hinders the progression of cross-cultural communication is that of stereotypes, whether intentional or subconscious, which "...cause major distortions in the way we communicate and interact with others, inhibit the development of trust and cultivate divisions" (De Vita, 2000: 169). This was reinforced in students' concerns about preparing and delivering group oral presentations. Stuart Hall defines the process of stereotyping in the following quote:

"Stereotypes get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognised characteristics about a person, reduce everything about a person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity" (Hall, 1997: 258).

Volet and Ang found that "...following the experience of culturally mixed groups, stereotypes were questioned" (Volet and Ang, 1998: 19). For example, the students that they observed re-considered the somewhat misguided preconception, shared by non-native students in an Australian University that local students were lazy and took a half-hearted approach to learning and completing assignments. Likewise, one Australian student revealed that he was forced to reevaluate his belief that all South-east Asian students were too quiet, stating that it was the complete opposite when working together.

When people, whether they be students or tutors, subscribe to largely misinformed notions based on stereotypical views, the learning process is instantly placed under threat. As a

result, within international HEIs, native and non-native students stick to 'their own', purposely avoiding interaction with people who may display different attitudes, beliefs, and cultural norms with which they are unfamiliar (Cathcart *et al*, 2006; Volet and Ang, 1998; Hall, 1997). Therefore, what begins as an ideal opportunity for interaction and intercultural communication between people from across the world ends with missed opportunities and wasted potential for culture sharing and learning.

In summary, oral communication skills development and assessment provides an ideal forum in which cross-cultural communication can be developed through feedback. It enables students from all backgrounds to participate in culture sharing and learning in the backdrop of an increasingly globalized world. Although there are issues concerning language difficulties, cultural differences, self-efficacy levels and reluctance from to mix, effective techniques have been developed to overcome such issues, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Making Oral Communication More Inclusive

International Students and Second Language Speakers:

The increasing number of studies exploring techniques aimed at overcoming self-efficacy issues and ensuring transparency and fairness in assessment of oral communication indicates a shift towards increasing the level of inclusivity for international, second language speaking students. This is in response to both moral and educational arguments and legal requirements. In the UK a General Duty of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 is to "promote good relations between people of different racial groups" (HMSO, 2000), though Smith (2007) highlights the fact that although racial equality has been promulgated by law, it has yet to be genuinely reflected in the curriculum.

Peer modelling:

With regards to enhancing the confidence of international students when making an oral presentation, the aforementioned study, conducted by Adams (2004), investigated the comparative impact on self-efficacy of students being exposed to a 'peer model performance' (in which international students watch a video of an oral presentation carried out by a former international student) and an 'expert performance' (in this case, a university lecturer). Findings indicated increased levels of confidence/self-efficacy for the students who were asked to watch the peer model performance. Questionnaires completed by the students after they viewed the performance revealed the reasons behind the change. These included being able to see ways in which problems with pronunciation were overcome using strategies that they had learnt in class, and the belief that, if the former international student was able to successfully complete a task, which at first seemed daunting and beyond their capabilities, they too would be able to do the same.

Use of video:

Building on the effectiveness of video in the development of presentation and public speaking practices, the authors have found that in addition to observing and critiquing others' performances, most presenters (not only international students) find watching their own presentations useful. They value the opportunity for enhanced self-reflection and the concrete opportunity to identify strengths that might otherwise remain unacknowledged and improve on perceived weaknesses that video offers, as the following quote illustrates:

“I can see the shortcomings of my presentation and also the positive points that can be hard to remember after without a visual support.” (Armstrong *et al*, 2007)

Furthermore, Krasniewski (2001) recognises the benefits of using video to enhance evaluative discussion between students and lecturers regarding their presentations.

For some students watching their ‘performance’ on video is seen to build their self-confidence. For others the experience might be counterproductive, so much so that they may choose to disengage before benefits are felt, as this student’s feedback illustrates:

“Could only watch the start, did not like viewing myself.” (Armstrong *et al*, 2007).

Creating ‘safe’ environments:

Whole-group interaction and having to present to a large audience may increase levels of stress, especially if students come from a background where it is uncommon to do so. Johnson (1997) recommends small-group interaction as an effective alternative as smaller groups can lessen the pressure and enable easier communication in a more comfortable setting (Johnson, 1997).

Suggested changes to the curriculum include the promotion and implementation of cross-cultural group work, particularly in the first year (Volet and Ang, 1998). They emphasise the fact that students themselves will make no attempt to move away from their ‘safety zone’, and tend to choose to work in monocultural groups and stress that “more drastic, interventionist measures may need to be taken” (Volet and Ang, 1998: 18). Cathcart *et al* (2006) conclude that tutors across all subject areas (rather than solely those interested in cross-cultural communication):

“...need to apply the principle of inclusion, designing teaching, learning and assessment strategies that incorporate opportunities for all students to contribute, regardless of their backgrounds” (Cathcart *et al*, 2006).

Much of the literature which focuses on inter-cultural communication within educational institutions places great importance on sharing information between lecturers, local and international students and encouraging cross-cultural communication, in an effort to help overcome cultural differences or barriers to learning and teaching (Volet and Ang, 1998; Angelova and Riazantseva, 1999; Cathcart *et al*, 2006). Only then can we overcome “discrimination and lack of mutual cultural knowledge” (De Vita, 2000: 169). An increasing amount of literature argues that rather than international students being expected to simply adopt the behaviour, attitudes and learning styles of those around them in order to ‘fit in’, universities should introduce the notion that successful integration and culture sharing and learning is, in fact, a two-way process, which requires the effort of both parties (Smith, 2007; Johnson, 1997; Angelova and Riazantseva, 1999).

Inclusive Language:

A number of authors (De Vita, 2000; Ryan, 2000) advise on the need to avoid the use of colloquialisms, provide glossaries of acronyms and explain culturally specific references (such as football clubs and breweries) which may be unfamiliar to international students.

Another issue is around conceptions of acceptable English, which although dynamic, particularly given its global usage, can be persistently discriminatory. For example,

although teachers in the author's research personally accept International English, it could be that this is not made explicit enough to students:

“Considering...that we live in a multicultural community from an academic...and a social point of view, we know that we can't expect a perfect level of English from everyone, although we have to expect the same level of understanding ...I have to be flexible to the fact that because you are oriental your pronunciation is not going to be as clear to me...Yes, there is an allowance for it and I think that they don't understand that” (Teacher). (Smith, 2007)

Devising criteria that make these 'allowances' explicit to students and assessors would be difficult, as International English is continually evolving and conceptions of acceptable English are wide-ranging and entrenched. Furthermore, this may not address issues over lack of confidence or cultural capital that prevents students from contributing to dialogue. A suggestion is to make “the learner aware of cross-cultural variations in the use of English and [maximise] his or her ability to...accept plurality of norms” (Bhatia, 1997: 318, cited in Jenkins, 2000:22). After all, graduates will be increasingly required to communicate effectively in International English, both socially and professionally.

Specific examples of discrimination, based on linguistic difference that this research project discovered, had a direct impact on the second language speakers' learning experience. For example, it emerged that some non-native speakers had chosen not to, or had been advised by group members that they should not, take part in delivering the oral presentation:

“We not take part, all the group, in the presentation. In the end of the presentation I feel I am not satisfied because we not share [amongst] all group members because what we looking to get [is a] good presentation...A good grade, that's why we tried to use the best of our members.” (Second language speaker, Home student) (Smith, 2007:tbc)

Such incidences were fed back to the teaching team and module and curricular adjustments made to address this inequality of opportunity include incorporating a presentation skills workshop and videoed practice presentations, making assessment criteria more explicit, requiring all students to present and providing formative feedback.

Students with Disabilities:

As the student population of higher education institutions has grown in the last few decades, partly thanks to widening participation initiatives, so too has the number of students with disabilities. Alongside this, the UK introduced the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001 which brought education under disability discrimination legislation. This legislation requires that universities make reasonable adjustments so that disabled students are not disadvantaged, including around the development and assessment of oral communication practices. This example, given on the excellent Open University website (available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching/pages/inclusive-teaching/learning-environments.php>), offers techniques for making group discussions more inclusive:

“Here are some points to consider when drawing up communication rules:

- Choose a quiet place to work so that everyone can concentrate
- Book an induction loop if the group includes a deaf student
- Make sure the seating is arranged so all group members can see each other, for example in a circle or around a table
- Indicate by raising a hand before starting to speak, so a deaf student knows who is speaking
- Give your name before you speak, so that a visually impaired student knows who is speaking
- Take turns to speak and do not interrupt
- Speak clearly and at a normal pace
- Ensure your face and mouth are not hidden or obscured while speaking
- Be prepared to repeat what you have said, or to rephrase it
- Allow all students sufficient time to make their contribution
- Use e-mail or text messaging rather than a telephone if group members find that more accessible" (OU, 2006)

Other literature focuses on making assessment more inclusive, such as this web-based resource from the Australian National University, titled *Managing Oral Examinations for Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Staff and Students* (available at: www.anu.edu.au/disabilities/resources_for_staff/oral_exams.php). This resource offers guidance on conducting taped exams and oral interviews, for example.

Social anxiety:

An area of particular interest and relevance when exploring oral communication practices is social anxiety. This condition was brought to the authors' attention by Graham Russell, Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Mental Health at Plymouth University. Social anxiety disorder is the most common anxiety disorder and is the third most common psychiatric disorder in the USA (Muzina and El-Sayegh, 2001). Unlike the usual nerves experienced by many people in new social situations, this condition makes sufferers feel distressed, particularly when engaging in such activities as public speaking, asking questions, giving reports in groups, expressing disagreement and speaking in class, because they feel that they will embarrass themselves and that others are judging them negatively. As Muzina and El-Sayegh explain, "They frequently judge themselves harshly and perceive others' reactions to their performance as negative" (2001:653).

The two subtypes of social anxiety disorder are recognised as:

- specific (or discrete) social anxiety disorder or performance anxiety which relates to speaking to an audience, as in a formal oral presentation
- generalised social anxiety disorder which results in fear of all social interaction and therefore could impact on speaking in seminars, working in groups etc.

As a result that sufferers either avoid such stress inducing situations or undergo them with psychological distress and physical reactions such as tachycardia, increased blood pressure, trembling, shaking voice, shortness of breath, sweating, poor eye contact (Muzina and El-Sayegh, 2001:652).

Implications for teaching in universities are that alternative arrangements might need to be made if students are to be assessed by oral presentation. For example, presentations might be delivered to the tutor only or performed alone and videoed for assessment purposes. Unlike shyness, which can be reduced by experience, in the case of social anxiety disorder social experiences may actually reinforce anxieties. That said, psychosocial treatment for anxiety is exposure to feared situations and clinical guidance

recommends the anxieties around public speaking might be addressed through practice in a safe and supportive environment, like those offered in learning development workshops. Where students with this condition choose to avoid situations that induce anxiety this may result in absences from group meetings and seminars and avoidance of speaking in groups. The reasons for this behaviour need to be taken into account and not assumed to be disengagement or laziness. Dialogue between the sufferer, teachers and other students would be dependent on whether they had disclosed and how willing they were to discuss the condition.

Conclusion

This literature review has sought to identify both the issues and strategies for addressing these issues, in particular aspects of the oral communication learning area, namely preparing and delivering presentations, speaking in seminars/discussion groups, intercultural communication and ensuring inclusivity when developing and assessing oral communication practices. The review has identified theory, such as cultural capital and dimensions of oral assessment, empirical research findings, such as research into how to encourage question asking and the benefits of peer modelling, and practice-based evidence like anecdotal evidence about how students feel about watching their presentations on video. It has also sought to highlight specific aspects of a wide range of practical guidance for students and their teachers for developing specific oral communication practices that might be dipped into to enhance the curriculum. Furthermore, though not exhaustive, this literature review has allowed us to identify areas of particular interest, where there may be gaps in knowledge and a lack of evidence-base that the LearnHigher project can usefully explore further.

If readers have any suggestions for additional issues that we might investigate, please contact Kate Smith, Oral Communication Learning Area Coordinator (kate.smith@brunel.ac.uk).

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