

Comment: Don't read your papers please!

Norbert Schmitt

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One of the first things we teach our students in any oral presentation class is to avoid reading their speech, and to rely instead on brief notes in order to maintain eye contact with and sensitivity to the audience. Yet when we go to applied linguistics or foreign language teaching conferences, we find some presenters doing just what we tell our students is unacceptable—reading their papers to the audience. To my mind, this practice is inadvisable, and should be highly discouraged for the following reasons:

1 Probably the most important reason that presentations should not be read is that the audience is unable to understand the material very well. Studies comparing written and spoken discourse have repeatedly shown that the two are different. Spoken discourse must be processed in real time, and so has a number of features that make it easier to digest. It generally uses a smaller range of vocabulary, most of the words used are of a higher frequency, and the grammatical structures are generally simpler. Spoken discourse typically has a great deal of repetition to ensure the main points are successfully transferred. Contrary to what traditional grammar books may say, spoken discourse consists mainly of phrases, not complete sentences, and contains many pauses and hesitations. On the other hand, written discourse is denser, containing extended, complex sentence structures, lower frequency vocabulary, and little repetition. This is fine if one is reading, since the text can be read as many times as necessary, but understanding written discourse read aloud can be very difficult indeed. At recent conferences in Singapore and the UK, I have observed audiences steadily 'fade out' from presentations which are read aloud, to the point where the majority were either checking the conference schedule, daydreaming, or sleeping. The upshot is that many (if not most) members of a typical audience cannot completely process and understand a presentation that is being read.

2 Presentations that are read tend to be dull and static. Reading a presentation by definition makes it difficult to maintain eye contact with the audience, which results in the speaker becoming isolated from them. It also disrupts the natural prosody found in normal speech, often

resulting in what could be described as a monotone. Audio-visual aids can liven up a presentation, but it is difficult to use them successfully when concentrating on a written text. In fact, it is not easy even to write on a blackboard while reading from a text.

3 Timing is another key element for effective presentations, but when one is tied to a text, flexibility is severely limited. With outline notes, only the important points are written down, making it easy to highlight them if time grows short. With a complete text, however, it is much more difficult to extract the key points. If the text has been read more slowly than expected, later key points may have to be hastily glossed over or cut completely because they could not be presented out of sequence.

4 After attending a number of presentations during a conference, participants inevitably reach a point of saturation. When giving a presentation, it is probably best to concentrate on a limited number of key points which you would like your audience to remember after they have left. If more detailed information is important, it should be put on a handout where participants can reflect on it at leisure after the rush of the conference is over. Read presentations often attempt to cover every aspect of their topic in detail, which is practically useless, since the average listener will not be able to remember that level of detail, or even take it down in notes.

5 Read presentations discourage questions during the talk. Many people feel that the best time to handle questions is when they arise in the audience's mind. This way the audience is constantly building a foundation on which to base their understanding of later points. If questions are held to the end of the presentation, this may lead to confusion on points later in the talk. Additionally, questions held until later may be forgotten, and thus never answered. Questions during the talk also give feedback to the presenter about how well his or her ideas are being understood. While this may not fit every speaker's style, reading a presentation virtually eliminates this option.

6 If the session is being translated into sign language for deaf participants, reading a presentation will make it very difficult for the signers. I noticed a signer having trouble with a presentation at a recent UK conference and asked her about it afterwards. She said that she missed a lot, including all of the author references, because there was too much detail, and because at times she herself could not understand the speaker's points.

Coming from a background in applied linguistics and language teaching, we should know better than most the problems associated with reading a presentation. So why do some people do it? Two obvious reasons are the anxiety of speaking before an audience of one's peers, and fears about a lack of language proficiency if presenting in an L2. These reasons should not be trivialized, but speakers thinking of freeing themselves from written texts should take heart that audiences in our field, at least at the conferences that I have been to, are extremely supportive, being more

worried about ideas than the occasional slip in fluency. In fact, many of the conference participants that I have spoken to find read presentations irritating, for all of the above reasons. In the end, presentations are for the audience, so even if it is initially a bit nerve-wracking, we owe it to our listeners to present in a way that is best for them, not us.

The author

Norbert Schmitt was so nervous during his first presentation, that he could barely hang on to his notes. He has found that it definitely becomes easier the more you do it. He is co-editor with Michael McCarthy of *Vocabulary: Description, Acquisition, and Pedagogy* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), and is completing his PhD at the University of Nottingham.