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### Abstract

Challenges arise in administering courses via online platforms in every aspect of the educational field. Open Distance Learning (ODL) has been enforced in almost all educational institutions to ensure ongoing teaching and learning. This study explored persuasive strategies of Professional Communication students in presenting their projects via an online platform. The participants' prerecorded presentations were transcribed and analysed thematically based on Rhetorical Appeals proposed by Aristotle to unveil the prominent persuasive strategies applied in achieving the course outcomes. The results of this study revealed Logos or argument-focused strategy as the prominent persuasive skill used by the students in attracting their project prospects. In addition to the data analysis, ethos, or speaker-focused strategy, was applied moderately, while pathos, or the audience-focused strategy, was the least used to persuade the audience. Indeed, the results of this study provide extensive knowledge of the subject and the research context, specifically in the field of Professional Communication course.

**Keywords:** Persuasive Strategies, Professional Communication, ESL Learners, ODL Presentation

### Introduction

Open Distance Learning (ODL) has been widely practised in most institutions worldwide amidst the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure the continuity of the learning process among students in attaining their academic goals. In addition to the ODL platform, technology integration is undeniably vital to facilitate educators and learners for effective learning outcomes. While the effectiveness of online education is being questioned, it is gradually regarded as a more inclusive Mode of Instruction (MoI) that aligns with contemporary living standards and provides more convenient teaching and learning ambiance (Navarro & McGrath, 2021). However, there have also been concerns that higher education programmes have become immersed in theory learning instead of hands-on, practical work (Razali et al., 2021). In this sense, most higher education institutions in Malaysia have also efficiently

revised their curriculum to be both industry and community relevant through experiential learning, which requires collaboration between higher education and industry partners.

Generally, communication involves interaction within a social context to exchange signals in the form of verbal, graphical, gestural, or visual (Fatimayin, 2018). In referring to the ODL setting, successful communication could be one of the greatest challenges to ensuring mutual understanding of the speakers and audience compared to the face-to-face setting. According to Bennetch, Owen and Keeseey (2022), convincing others through communication is called rhetoric. This enables the speaker who practises rhetorical principles to cultivate the skills of recognising how we are persuaded and how to persuade others for our professional purposes. However, convincing people about the proposed project through an online setting is extremely challenging compared to a face-to-face setting due to the limitation in many ways.

In this research context, the highlights will be on the persuasive strategies used in ODL settings involving ESL learners in professional communication presentations. Indeed, the Professional Communication Exercise course was designed to expose students to real workplace situations. Unfortunately, the pandemic limits their chance to expand their skills and abilities in practicing workplace ethics, professionalism, and entrepreneurial talents within the actual setting. In addition to the course requirements, the fact that students either lack or have no experience in presenting their project proposal in an industry setting could be another challenge. The students not only need to persuade people about their proposed project but also to win over those involved, such as the examiners, the audience, and the invited panels from industries, virtually.

Besides that, practical and technical challenges involving the ODL setting, such as the presentation time and duration, the number of presenters involved in one session, the instability of internet connection and also the limitation of human interactions through online platforms make this research relevant as a result would contribute to better strategies of effective online presentation, professionally. Therefore, this study aims to identify persuasive strategies employed by Professional Communication Exercise students to attract audiences through online platform presentations based on Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals; Ethos, Logos, and Pathos.

### **Underpinning Theories**

This study employs Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals to provide an extensive understanding of persuasive skills in professional communication presentations. Aristotle's rhetorical theory represents three types of persuasion between speaker and listener by providing logical proof (Logos), revealing the speaker's credible character (Ethos), and interconnecting with the audience (Pathos).

Logos, also known as a rational appeal, seeks to persuade the audience intellectually through logical evidence, facts, rationality, and critical reasoning. It focuses on the details of the message presented to make it credible and reasonable (Sirk, 2020). The appeal of logos employs facts and insightful statements to engage the audience and influence them to think and feel a certain way. Ethos, on the other hand, is an argument that appeals to the audience by emphasizing the speaker's credibility and authority. Ethos seeks to convince the audience that the speaker can be trusted and believed due to the noble character or ethical ways of presenting ideas. Apart from that, ethos can also be established through the thoroughness of information presented, the speaker's expertise and knowledge, experience, and training

which can lead to a good impression that gives the audience a reason for listening. Lastly, pathos is the use of emotional appeals that engages the audience's feelings to get persuaded. A speaker often uses dramatic and emotional words to awaken the audience's positive or negative emotions.

Table 1

*Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals*

Ethos	The art of convincing by the character of an author is referred to as Ethos (i.e. credibility), or ethical appeal. There is a tendency of believing people whom we respect. Projecting an impression to the reader that you are someone worth listening to is one of the central problems of argumentation, in other terms placing yourself as an author of an authority on the paper's subject, as well as a person who is both worthy of respect and likable.
Pathos	The art of persuading by means of appealing to the emotions of readers is referred to as Pathos (i.e. emotional). Seeing how pathos, emotional appeals, are used to persuade can be based on texts ranging from classic essays to contemporary advertisements. An audience's emotional response can be affected by the choice of language, and an argument can be enhanced through the use of an effective emotional appeal.
Logos	Logos (i.e. logical) refers to a reasoning-based persuading. Deductive and inductive reasoning shall also be considered, as well as the discussion of what leads to a persuasive as well as an effective reason for the backup of claims. The heart of argumentation is based on 'giving reasons', and it cannot be over-emphasised. Kinds of support that could be used to authenticate a thesis shall be studied, as well as consideration of some logical fallacies that are common, in order to avoid them while writing.

Source: *Aristotle's Rhetoric (1959)*

Ahmed et al (2020) highlighted that a theory is a collection of interrelated concepts, factors, interpretations, and premises that presents a systematic view of phenomena by defining the relationship between variables to explain a natural phenomenon. This theory definitely aided the researchers in examining the prominent rhetorical appeals used by students in convincing the audience through online presentation which is relevant for the researchers to interpret and justify the findings to construct meaning.

### Literature Review

Rhetoric exists in every kind of communication and has persuasion at its core (Isai et al., 2020). Studies on persuasive strategies involving spoken and written forms of communication have been explored in various research contexts. According to Khairuddin et al. (2021), the elements of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos can be applied to spoken and written communication. In higher education institutions, studies on effective communication have been widely discussed involving students from different domains. A survey conducted by Baby (2018) on ESL learners' communication strategies revealed the need and necessity for restructuring the syllabus, particularly for speaking skills, by focusing more attention on the pragmatic aspect of the language and teaching effective communication strategies to ESL learners. However, the study generally focused on ESL communication strategies in given situations and did not emphasise persuasive language. In light of this, researchers of the present study have been progressively interested in investigating the persuasive strategies of ESL learners in professional communication presentation, specifically in the current platform of ODL setting. Furthermore, numeral research has also been done on the Rhetorical Approach of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos. Isai et al (2020) studied the use of Ethos, Pathos and Logos in persuasive email writing and determined if these features were used appropriately. On the other hand, Khairuddin et al (2021) identified rhetorical strategies used by good and poor writers through

argumentative essay writing. Reviewing the literature has discovered that studies on rhetorical appeals mostly focus on written and printed forms of the language involving several different materials. There is also research on rhetorical appeals of spoken language, but the spotlight has been given to speeches of famous people, especially politicians, as persuasive strategies are used at the utmost level to hook their voters. For example, Quijano (2020) analysed the rhetorical appeals and devices used by the three recent presidents of the Republic of the Philippines and discovered that there was a tendency for speakers to adapt their rhetorical appeals to the context of their vocations.

Although the review on persuasive strategies has been addressed in the literature to different degrees, there is still inadequate recent information exclusively on persuasive strategies of ESL students in the Professional Communication course. Furthermore, in conducting ODL, content-based testing has shifted to performance-based assessment because it is no longer used for grading and certification; instead, it has been linked with the learning and skill development of the students (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). Therefore, in line with the recent educational reforms, the ODL platform that almost every student throughout the Covid-19 pandemic has extensively used serves as the basis of the present study in examining technology integration and how rhetorical appeals are used to convince potential project prospects.

### **Methodology**

The present study employed the qualitative research methodology to analyse the persuasive strategies applied by ESL learners in professional communication presentations. Zhang and Wildermuth's (2009) content analysis method is used in this study involving seven steps, which are the preparation of data, defining the units of analysis, developing categories and coding scheme, testing the coding scheme on a sample of text, coding all texts, assessing coding consistency and drawing a conclusion from the coded data. This analysis method is selected because it allows subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. Purposive sampling was used to elicit rich data and match the objectives of this study. Data were collected through transcriptions of students' presentations after obtaining their consent. The analysis ended when the data gathered reached a saturation level in which the data could provide sufficient information to answer the research question and replicate the study, and no new data emerged. Therefore, gaining new information and further coding was no longer feasible. The codes, categories, and themes of the analysis were then determined and placed into a thematic diagram to understand the themes better.

There will be concerns regarding the researchers' intention to interpret the data in any interpretive study. This concern might leave room for misinterpretation and introduce a level of uncertainty about the validity of any qualitative study. The research context is a dynamic process where the researchers play a central role; thus, sensitivity to the context and the development of the relationship with participants is vital to its success. It also acknowledges that data interpretation is highly subjective and interpretations need to be well-evidenced and grounded in raw data. Cohen's Kappa coefficient statistic was used for inter-rater reliability measurement to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis

### **Results**

The results are categorised according to the prominent persuasive strategies applied by the participants based on the three Rhetorical Appeals: Logos, Ethos and Pathos.

**LOGOS: Argument-focused Strategies**

Logos or argument-focused strategy has been identified as the prominent persuasive strategy used by the participants of this study. Presenting distinctive project features is the primary argument-focused strategy used by the participants in their professional communication online presentations. Most participants highlighted their project significance through product uniqueness, practicality, and improvement and affordability of their products. For example, SP7 stated that his project differs based on how he delivers the storyline for each folklore, while SP3 highlighted the sole purpose of his project to make a book where children may enjoy reading without feeling lost because the tool team explains words they don't understand. In addition to the argument-focused strategies, trends and designs were emphasised to attract project prospects by developing trending products with modern designs and visually appealing designs. Besides that, the participants also enclosed various topics and genres as well as trending issues related to their project development as one of the argument-focused strategies.

The second argument-focused strategy applied by the participants is highlighting the valuable impacts of the project. The participants claimed that their projects led to many positive outcomes in language learning engagement, intercultural competence, boosting confidence and serving as cultural resources. Besides that, the values attained through the developed projects, such as entertainment and educational and traditional and integrated values, were also emphasised as part of the argument-focused strategies to convince the audience. For example, SP8 highlighted that the idea of combining education and video games was developed through this project development, which led him to create a concept known as edutainment, the combination of education and entertainment. On top of that, enjoyable learning experiences and using products for leisure activities were correspondingly stated as one of the beneficial impacts by the participants in persuading their target prospects.

The participants also promoted customers' convenience through their project presentation as one of the argument-focused strategies to attract potential prospects for their products. The aspects of user and novice-friendly, all-around users, easy accessibility, and technological involvement were recurrently highlighted in the presentation.

Other than that, catering to social issues serves as another argument-focused strategy to entice the audience during the online project presentation. Most of the participants reported that the projects were developed based on public interest and related to local sentiment. Apart from that, the participants also claimed that some social issues could be resolved through their project development, such as insufficient related sources, language learning difficulties and change of lifestyle.

**ETHOS: Speaker-focused Strategies**

From the data analysis, presenter and project development credibility have been recognised as the speaker-focused strategies or ethos, moderately used by the participants to convince the audience.

In terms of presenter credibility, most participants included self-assurance, self-accomplishment and self-design of the products in their online presentations. SP6 highlighted that all the designs are self-made from sketching on a piece of paper, using the Canva app to make the final version of the design and finally sending it to the printing company. Apart from that, they also reported business etiquette, business transparency, business networking plan and the systematic procedures applied for the project. Indeed, the credibility of the

participants in deciphering feedback, overcoming the crisis and establishing career paths were also mentioned in the presentation as part of the persuasive strategies.

In addition to speaker-focused strategies in persuading the audience, project development credibility has also been applied by almost all participants in their presentations. The participants highlighted that the project developed was research-based, profit potential, e-accessibility, quality assurance, reliable and received positive responses from target consumers. SP5 mentioned that after receiving feedback from the market survey, she started to create the product by drafting out the storyline, sketching the characters and finalizing the illustrations for every chapter. SP3 also stated the initiatives which the project started with small-scale research to define the problem related to pronunciation learning, especially among children, followed by two surveys before and after completing the project to identify the product's effectiveness. The participants also presented their marketing plans, strategies and sustainability goals to convince the audience besides emphasizing the collaborative works and marketing potentials of their projects, locally and internationally.

### **PATHOS: Audience-focused Strategies**

Pathos is the least used strategy in persuading the audience through online platforms. However, the audience-focused strategies discovered throughout the online presentation by the participants are, evoking a sense of community, sparking interest, and eliciting sympathy. In persuading the audience, some participants awakened a sense of community by emphasizing the strengths of their projects which promote intercultural communication importance, cultural preservation, ancestral legacy, social bonding, and rapport. SP2 explained that the meaning behind the context of reviving the legends in the project title is to bring back legendary Malaysian folklore that is gradually disappearing from the current generation.

Moreover, the participants captivated the audience's interests by sharing connected experiences, expressing understanding and triggering curiosity about their projects. They also remarked on the decision to develop the experience-based project, which consisted of personal attachment and led to self-evaluation as part of audience-focused strategies. SP10 mentioned that the project holds personal baggage for himself as a way to break free from his own reserved nature, which he has struggled with for quite a while.

On top of that, some participants appealed to the audience's emotions by eliciting sympathy by sharing the detailed procedures of their project development, such as the thorough consideration before decision-making and the tedious process they handled in completing the project. For example, SP1 highlighted the process as quite fun but also quite hard, especially for the illustration part, which took her about two weeks to finalise the design and illustration of the product, while SP3 mentioned that the most challenging step was the illustration because it took her five weeks to finish all 70 pages of the E-Book.

### **Discussion**

From the data analysis, it has been discovered that Logos or argument-focused strategies were applied by most participants in convincing the audience through their project presentation via an online platform. The majority preferred to give logical reasoning and present reliable and 'making-sense' data instead of pathos that appeals to the audience's emotions. On the other hand, the participants have moderately used speaker-focused strategies or ethos.

Based on the results, it is believed that the professional communication students have effectively applied professionalism through their project presentations. Using Logos to logically connect their idea by conducting a small-scale survey to develop the projects is undeniably convincing. Also, persuading the audience through character and credibility or ethos is significant, especially through an online presence. However, the moderate use of ethos or speaker-focused strategy reflects that all participants are at the same educational level as ESL learners conducting a project to fulfil the course requirement. It leads them to use ethos by executing future planning and the direction of their project, which can be considered a wise strategy to attract the audience, especially people from the industry. Furthermore, pathos or audience-focus strategy in the present study was applied the least by the participants to create a sense of mutual understanding as this persuasive skill mainly focuses on sharing similar context through demonstrating awareness of cultural differences, sharing past experiences and the struggles that they have gone through in developing the project.

In terms of professionalism, it can be stated that the participants in this study are on the right track as they managed to portray their skills proficiently through logical thinking and reliable data. Nevertheless, they need more than that to engage the audience virtually and persuade them via an online platform. This is due to the different personal realms of the audience with the presenter throughout the session. Furthermore, as a Logos or argument-focused strategy was frequently used by the participants, combining Ethos and Pathos in persuading the audience via a virtual session is also advisable as the inflexible prerecorded presentation would be livelier and more appealing.

### **Limitation**

Even though the present study revealed constructive results on the persuasive skills applied by the students of professional communication course via an online platform, several limitations of this study should also be declared. The first is the effectiveness of the participants' arguments from the audience's perspective. It is recommended that future studies examine whether the persuasive skills used positively correlate with the audience's interest, as the audience is from different backgrounds and expertise.

Second, besides investigating the persuasive skills verbally, it is recommended to look at the language choice and the visual aspect of the online presentation to see how they affect the persuasive strategy used by professional communication students. Again, exploring other contributing elements may provide useful data to address this limitation.

### **Conclusion**

Fundamentally, the fact that all participants conducted the projects as part of the requirements in professional communication exercise has made the result meaningful. This is due to their prominent persuasive skills, significantly reflecting the intended course outcomes.

Moreover, the results of this study provide extensive knowledge of the subject and the research context, specifically in the field of Professional Communication course. It is also believed that this study could better understand persuasive strategies in online presentation and supervision, as the present study may serve as a guide for future student supervisors.

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