

Some Suggestions to Defend Viva-voce Successfully

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Abstract

Viva voce, the oral presentation of academic research, also known as thesis defense, is nerve wracking experience for most of the students. Many experienced people also become panic during paper presentation in front of scholars. In such context, it would not be a surprise if students become nervous during their thesis defense. The objective of this paper is to explore the experiences of the scholars during viva voce and make students informed about the steps to prepare oral presentation. This study is based on primary and secondary data. Four case studies were collected from PhD holders from Universities of Nepal through personal communication during the year 2016. Secondary data were pulled from web sites. The findings of the study revealed that many of the scholars including national and international have unpleasant experiences. Such unpleasant experiences are not associated with only students' poor work, poor presentation, and nervousness but also with committee members' attitude, and unclear questions. It can be concluded that the work of the students' is already evaluated and recommended to award degree by the supervisor, co-supervisor, and internal examiner. Therefore, it can be said that the viva voce should not be only one determining factor for assessing whether to award degree or not. However, it is students' responsibility to defend their viva perfectly.

Key words: *Oral presentation process, Student's experience, Evaluation, Committee members.*

Introduction

In academic arena everyone, who completes Doctor of philosophy (PhD) or Master's Degree, has to go through viva voce to express/describe their work orally so that the research committee can evaluate the originality and researchers' in-depth knowledge about research topic. This process is known as "viva voce", "oral presentation" and "thesis defense". It is common for students to become nervous in front of scholars while presenting their work. It is incredibly challenging job for students to synthesize their couple of years' long work into few limited pages and describe it in words within limited time (approximately half an hour). Basten (2010) has defined 'Viva Voce' as "a live voice and more assessment of the work than the oral presentation with slides. It is typically based on the thesis not on a slide show, with the panel asking students specific questions about their work". The objective of the viva voce is to evaluate whether the thesis is student's own work, understand what s/he did and whether he/she is worth of awarding degree (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, 2006) Oral

presentation gives an opportunity to encourage broader dissemination of research; and highlight the weaknesses or the work that have not pay attention in study. However, one of the disadvantages of oral examinations is that a relaxed, somewhat articulate but weak student could receive a higher score than her or his performance warrants, whereas a knowledgeable student who is less socially adept could receive a lower than warranted score. Therefore, it cannot be used alone to determine the ultimate passing or failing of any student (Ganji, 2017). Mirza (2016) studied about the perception of undergraduate medical students regarding viva voce and found stress in more than 90 % before viva examinations. Forty percent males and 54.3 % females were not satisfied with their score. Grudges or favoritism or luck, dress up were indicated as the score determining factors. He concluded that majority of students do not satisfy with the process of viva examination. The reason for students' upsetting and painful experience, though they were awarded doctoral degree, were associated with examiner's behavior Wallace and Marsh 2001 cited in Park, 2003).

Statement of problems

PhD degree is a honor awarded to the scholars and viva voce is an integral process of awarding PhD Degree. It is an opportunity for researchers to refine and improve their work for the urpose of establishing newly generated facts and theories. But literatures shows that many scholars ho through unpleasent environment. Changes in such practice is necessary to make this process respectful. Wide dissemination and discourse about the process is needed in this regard. *Publishing experiences, challenges faced by the students, during presentation might make the committee member aware of scholar's feelings and give new direction in this regard.*

Objective

The objective of the study is to find out different experiences of the students during viva voce and suggest some tips to prospective students for successful defense.

Methods and materials

The study is descriptive in nature. Qualitative data including both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from four PhD holders from two different University of Nepal. during 2016 as an experience sharing. Secondary data were pulled from the www.google during December 27, 2019 to January 2, 2020. Students' cases posted in website were selected based on different themes.

Results and findings

The respondents of the study were PhD graduates from Universities of Nepal. While secondary data represents the foreign Universities. The findings of the study revealed the fact that viva voce is like a ritual which is must to get the degree. The committee members raise many questions based on the presentation. It is student's responsibility to convince the committee that the study has been purely done by the students. There is just a thin line demarcation between the academic level between the committee member and the PhD scholar. However, the committee member treat PhD scholars as if they lack knowledge because they still have not owned the Degree. Following are eight cases which were analyzed for the purpose of this study. Out of eight cases, four cases are

narratives of students' expression collected from web sites, articles and remaining four cases studies collected through personal communication. These narratives depict the environment of the presentation and discussion during viva voce:

Case 1. "I thought the viva was more a conversation between different people, exploring different issues. So that you were more or less 'sort of more equal, you were all colleagues somehow. But it was very much more like an exam. It was definitely an exam, a test. I was made to feel very junior to them" (Brenda stated by Crossouard, 2011).

Case 2. "She kept sort of twisting the argument that I'd presented in the PhD and I couldn't for the life of me understand where she was coming from and how she thought the evidence pointed in that direction, so I ended up having this rather convoluted exchange with her because I couldn't see where she was coming from. (Christine stated by" Crossouard, 2011).

Case 3. She's going 'why haven't you cited my 2001 papers and my 2009 book? I don't see how you thought you could avoid mentioning what I say there'. Sometimes work is so important that it has to appear but that wasn't the case here[']but she insisted that there be amendments that included copious references to her stuff (Karla stated by Sikes, 2017)).

Case 4. "They were not at all interested in discussing the content of my thesis, but rather chose to focus on methodology for most of the time' when I showed them exactly where I do the things, they say I don't (with references to my chapter) they say it doesn't matter' They finally told me that I've passed because they think my work is of doctoral level. I am trying to be positive, but I cannot get over how it went down. Thought?" (ZoePhD, 2011).

Case 5. During preparation of my viva, I had asked seniors about their experience, everyone shared differently. Some of the scholars who had recently defended their PhD thesis had suggested me to shake my head and say okay "I will correct it" in case anybody raised any type of issues about my work because the questions raised from the floor are only based on the slides that I was going to present. So, I would not have to correct those issues in my draft copy. But I thought as an academician and expert of the topic, it would not be fair to escape easily from the questions raised by research committee. I tried my best to prove whatever I did in my thesis which was done with my full understanding. As a PhD student I was also stressed before and during viva voce. In general, the stress and bitter experience go right after achieving the degree away. But I was stressed and could not sleep two nights after achieving the degree. The stress was of two reasons. First, though the committee had congratulated me to achieving PhD degree, I had not got any written comments that I was supposed to incorporate in my final Draft. I was asked to come next day and collect the comments. I was afraid probably it will take more study to address the comments of the committee member and anxious whole night. The second reason for stress was quite unexpected comments. As I met the person whom I was supposed to collect my comments told me "Madame forget all those verbal comments you got from the floor just focused on written comments" and handed over few very minor comments which could be corrected without any additional information and justification (Experience sharing 2016).

Case 6. I had an opportunity to attend my friend's PhD defense. Observing the atmosphere of the presentation, I became so nervous and tensed about my own viva presentation that I got fever that evening (Experience sharing 2016).

Case 7. My thesis report was simple and descriptive. So, I was stressed during my viva presentation thinking the committee member might raise questions regarding methodology. But they did not raise questions about that. So, I would say my viva presentation went smoothly (Experience sharing 2016).

Case 8. The committee member had raised many issues during my viva presentation. I had learnt from someone else that I should not rewrite or incorporate the comments. I quietly shook my head as an obedient child and replied okay I will improve it. So, there were not any controversy about my presentation (Experience sharing 2016).

The above-mentioned narratives revealed that students face different types of dispute during viva voce. Member of the research committee raise unnecessary and irrelevant questions or twist the questions that make students humiliated and panic during presentation. It is a paradox do the research committee do this to cross check the students' whether the student do not work honestly, the research committee do not study the synopsis of the thesis, the research committee just raise questions to make their presence noticeable or harass students intentionally. Findings also revealed the fact that committee member also impose students to cite their work openly. As researcher, students should be fully aware about the available literatures related to his/her study. Students have right to decide whether the literature to cite or not. However, it would be hard as a student to clarify for not citing that work. Finally, this paper is based on only student's opinion, so it would not be fair to blame the committee member and validate students' views. Similar study regarding the experiences of research committee members, supervisors, co supervisors and internals and experts during viva voce might add new dimension in such study.

Recommendations to PhD Scholars to defend successfully

Literatures show that clear and logical deliverance of research theme and scientific result is an important component of successful oral presentation. Timsina (2016) suggests that examiners might have different personality: cooperative, harsh, try to prove their own competency by raising irrelevant and absurd questions. It is students' responsibility to defend his/her thesis confidently and being capable of claiming oneself as more knowledgeable about the study than supervisors and examiners. Dash (2017) points out understanding of own strength and weakness as must and advice four Ps: plan, prepare, and practice as the key of successfully achieving PhD degree. Understanding own strength and weakness of thesis is a must.

Following are some tips based on few scholarly papers and more of my experience. Publishing such experiences, challenges faced by students during presentation might be useful for prospective students to improve the dissertation.

During Writing

1. Extensive knowledge about Methodology: Substantial knowledge regarding research topic, research design, and research methodology is must for successful defend. Some of the most frequently raised issue during viva voce are as follow:

Sample size: One general rule about determining sample size is “larger the population smaller the size”. But sometimes, it is complicated for researcher to know the exact total population of the universe. Krejcie, R, V and Morgan, D.W (1970) have developed a sample size table in their article “Determining sample size for research activities”, which can be used as reference to determine the size of respondents for the study. Taking minimum of 385 sample size is an easy way to safe landing. According to them, if respondents are chosen scientifically, it can represent millions of population (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Research methodology: Research methodology itself is a mystery. There are so many methodology types that are not fully perfect and complete. Most suitable research method is based on type of research design, objective of the study. Researcher oneself is responsible to design and legitimate his/her research methodology. However, it is safe to follow previously tested and granted methodology with citation.

Sampling procedure: Researcher should have profound knowledge about probability and non-probability samplings, and their implications. At the time of presentation, presenter should be able to convince why s/he chose that particular sampling technique for the study.

Reason of site selection: There should be strong reason to select the specific site. Be prepared to answer why that site for study, if have chosen purposively.

Hypothesis / Research questions: Scholars have defined Hypothesis/research questions differently. For example: “Hypothesis is a formal statement that presents the expected relationship between an independent and dependent variable” (Creswell, 1994). “A research question is essentially a hypothesis asked in the form of a question (Prasad, Rao, & Rehani, 2001). Hypothesis is more precise which can be developed based on certain degree of knowledge whereas research questions can be made without any prior knowledge (Andrew, 2003). Very often scholars raised questions whether to use both research questions and hypothesis in one research or not and there is not any concrete answer about it. Based on the research design that is descriptive or explanatory, researcher can develop research questions/ hypothesis (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dean’s office, 2014).

Establishing findings: One of the most frequently asked and hardest question to answer during viva voce is “the new thing that study has added”. Students should be aware that “research does not only means discovering new thing from the universe but also finding about the social phenomenon that exist in society; but do not know where, when, why, and how and at what degree it exists”. In other word, research is also about unraveling existing social phenomenon.

During Presentation

1. *Visual aid:* A single picture gives millions of words. Chart papers, posters, pictures are some examples of visual aids. With the development of science and technology, power point has made the task simpler and effective. It is better to keep extra device to avoid

unexpected technical problems. In case of Nepal, we never know when the electricity goes off. So, it is recommended to make some hardcopies of slides too. Though the essence of viva voce is in oral presentation rather than visual aids, presentation without slides makes presentation poor because visual aids add life to the words, attracts research committee members' attention, make audience easy to understand. Last but not the least it kills your time, give a pause to think what to say next. While producing visual aids there is always a question in front of students about:

Total number of slides: There is not any thumb rule about the number of slides to be presented. Numbers of slides depend on the time available for the presentation. The maximum length of time provided does not mean that, students should have to use allocated time rather it means not to exceed the time limit. In general time allocation for each slide should be one to two minutes so that audience can go through the slide and presenter can get enough time to explain about.

Content of the slides: One of the major mistakes done by students is trying to say too much. The basic principle is that if asked to the committee member or the audience about student's work after a week, they should remember three key points that students delivered. Basically, short introduction, statement of the problem, rationale, objectives, research questions or hypothesis, research methodology, major findings, issues that are not solved in the study which can be raised for further study and conclusion are major components of oral presentation.

Pace: As already mentioned, describing a long years' work within short period of time is a challenge, it is natural to be nervous fearing that what if could not finish on time. In this context, pace reading is very essential.

During Discussion

1. Be focused on:

Words used for comments: Though considered as not good, it is traditional Nepalese culture that allows scholars side talking, making fun and so on. Do not focus on unwanted stuffs, rather on your own work, words used for comments, feedbacks and suggestions that need to be addressed.

Make short notes of the question: Everyone has their own way to ask questions. It is easy to answer sweet and short questions as they are easy to understand but, hard to understand lengthy or twisted questions. If so, pay attention to the questions, concentrate to specific word to be solved and note it down. If questions are pouring from the flour, it is impossible to note down whole sentences just write down the key words only. Otherwise, there is high chance of missing many questions. Moreover, be alert whether the issue is suggestions/feedbacks, confusion, or questions. Try to be specific and answer the questions precisely.

Believe on own work: Believe or not, research committee members will completely be unaware about students' whole thesis. Most of the questions raised are based on synopsis or immediate presentation. In this condition, some of the questions might be out of track or sometimes irrelevant too. Unable to answering such question is not students' fault (Basten, 2010). So, be positive to raised issues and queries; and answer assertively.

2. Keep format of the research report with you:

Format of dissertation is another mystery. Every department, institute and university have their own format that students must follow. There might be a situation where the research committee members might not be aware of the recently developed guidelines. As a student, presenter neither could raise sound nor defend aggressively. Once presentation is over, it is over forever. No one will get another opportunity. So, better to keep the format manual provided by the authority because keeping the guideline along with students is the best way to proof that s/he has exactly followed the format. If some errors exposed, students could prove that "it is not their fault".

3. Dare to say "No":

Doing a research does not mean that student know everything, except core content related to the topic, and supposed to answer perfectly. Examiners might ask any questions. So, it is okay to say, "I do not know". However, I rather suggest to response as "I am not sure, but I think", or something like that politely and confidently. So, act like authorities who understand best on the information presented, and methodology chosen for the study.

4. Rephrase the enquirer's question:

Sometimes it might be a hard to understand the question. If so, it is okay to request the enquirer to rephrase the question or rephrase the enquirer's question as per your understanding before answering the questions. But never ever answer the questions on assumption. Moreover, Success or failure of thesis is not, generally, determined through performance during defense but according to the content of the thesis. It is highly unlike to label as "NQ" (Not Qualified) if thesis is good and have done genuinely.

5.. Prove or modify:

Majority of the studies do have and will have certain strengths and weaknesses. Examiners will seek to find weaknesses of the study, discuss provide suggestions/feedback and of course an opportunity to improve it. Finding some weaknesses do not mean an indication of negative outcome. The most important part is to convince the research committee member that students has designed the research study wisely and presented reliably. To legitimate the study, student must prove it. In case of failure to legitimate research methodologies and findings, the student might not get the degree, or rewrite to modify the dissertation as per scholar's comments, suggestions and feedbacks. So as a scholar, student should accept the dispute boldly and clarify the confusion firmly. The fact is no one is perfect and there will always be space to improve the study.

Discussion and Conclusion

Viva voce is all about the work done by a student. There is no reason to be panic because the paper has already been evaluated by scholars especially supervisor, co-supervisor and the internal. However, it is natural to be nervous about describing the whole work that took few years in the field and thesis filled with thousands of words within limited minutes. It would not be so hard if all the work has been done by student himself/herself. In fact, oral presentation is a mystery until and unless a student faces it since the research committee members are changing time to time and the way they approach him/her differs from person to person. However, students should be confident, rational, and knowledgeable about the subject matter. It is up to students whether they blindly address whole issues raised during presentation and rewrite the thesis or believe on their own work and convince research committee rationally. It is quite surprising that

though the committee has full power of evaluating the thesis and deciding whether to award degree or not and what types of changes are must to get the degree, why don't they give written comments and feedback to the students if the committee finds so many issues on thesis.

Implication

The paper indicates that many scholars go through bitter experience during viva voce. Process of viva voce is like a ritual (*karmakanada* in Nepali) followed by research committee. Defenders are tested rudely and roughly to make sure that the study is original and have done by the students' their self. PhD is an honor that only few persons receives. So, it is University authorities' responsibility to make the viva voce process respectful.

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