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## **Evolving an Approach to Presentation Skills**

### **Presentation risks, fears, and benefits**

It's sometimes said that there are only two sure things in life: death and taxes--though not usually in that order, except for the very wealthy! To this pair of life certainties, let's be bold and add a third: being called upon to give a speech or presentation.

Speaking in front of an audience is something that all of us, voluntarily or not, occasionally must do. And whether it's in a classroom, a conference room or a club room, the ability to compose and convey a message clearly and engagingly to an audience of easily distracted multi-taskers can have a very positive impact on one's life, opening many doors to success—academic, professional, social and personal. In this sense, presentation skills are useful life skills.

Yet, 'public speaking' is also on most people's top-ten fear list. This isn't surprising as it can be a nerve-racking, stress-inducing experience. Even for native speakers, giving an effective presentation involves a complex combination of linguistic, organizational and performance skills that can differ in some important ways from 'normal conversation'. However, for non-native, non-fluent speakers, when faced with the prospect of presenting in English, the task can seem not just difficult, but overwhelming. Perhaps Mark Twain had them in mind when he said, "There are two types of speakers: Those who get nervous and those who are liars."

### **Growing a teaching plan**

Given the benefits and fears involved, how can we, as language teachers, provide our students with the confidence-building tools they need to fully take advantage of the opportunities (and requests!) they encounter in their lives to present their experiences, knowledge, ideas, and opinions?

For me, the above question took on some urgency several years ago when I was first asked to teach a presentation skills course at my university. I had never taught that course before, so it seemed to me that a useful starting point would be to think about the skills and features that are actually involved in making a presentation. Although public speaking situations do vary quite a bit depending on topic, venue, purpose and audience, I figured that most of these would generally fit:

- *Awareness of the listeners' needs and interests*
- *Having sufficient knowledge of a pre-determined topic*
- *Composing and structuring a text*
- *Practicing/rehearsing to 'fine tune' the message*
- *Speaking from notes or a script for a pre-designated time period*
- *Extended uninterrupted speaking (minimal turn taking)*
- *Being goal directed and remaining on topic*
- *Using performance techniques to bridge distance*
- *Managing nerves and anxiety (stage fright)*

Even at first glance, it became fairly obvious to me that quite a few skills and features involved in presentations fall outside the norms of 'conversation'. However, with no specific ideas about how to go about teaching presentation skills, a busy timetable of classes and no suitable course book to rely on, I started the semester with little more than my trusty binder stuffed full of speaking activities I had been using in my 'Oral Communication' (i.e. 'Conversation') classes. Of course, it didn't take long before I started running out of suitable activities that would eventually get my students to the point where they could stand in front of the class and speak for five to six minutes about a designated topic.

That's when I decided to enlist the activities I'd been using in my writing classes. Surprisingly, this semi-random merger of my speaking and writing activities managed to get us through a few weeks worth of lessons with a modicum of success. And that gave me the impetus to begin developing activities along the same lines that would see us through a few more student presentations during the rest of the semester.

The activities I began to design needed to include the development of speaking skills as well as planning and composing skills, so what took shape was the borrowed framework of the 'process approach' I was using to structure my writing classes. With minor adjustments, it seemed that this framework was able to accommodate the brainstorming—planning—organizing—composing--editing skills relevant to writing, as well as the speaking and performance skills that the students also needed to work on for presentations.

### **Adapting a process approach**

The process approach was developed in the 1970s in the US, mainly to teach literacy and writing skills to children in elementary schools (Sun and Feng, 2009). As the term implies, the focus of the teacher's attention and lesson planning is not so much on the finished 'product', but rather on the writing 'process', i.e. the stages a writer normally engages in to produce a finished text. In this sense, the 'product', whether it's a descriptive paragraph, a story, or an academic essay, is viewed as the culmination of several individualized, often recursive, steps or stages (Murray, 1990). For teachers, one important benefit of a process approach is that it helps students to understand what writers actually do when they write, in turn, helping them to become more independent writers. It also provides teachers with a reality-based lesson framework that is readily transferable to a variety of writing topics and genres.

The lesson framework often revolves around a series of key questions that writers must tackle, either implicitly or explicitly, when they are attempting to construct a text:

*What do I write about?  
Who is/are my reader/s?  
What information do I include?  
What language do I need for this genre & topic?  
How do I structure/organize my text?  
What stylistic techniques can enhance my text?  
How can I make the composition better?*

Of course, as I could see when struggling with a viable structure to frame my first presentation skills course, it wouldn't take much tweaking to apply these key questions to constructing an oral text, such as a speech or presentation:

*What do I ~~write~~ talk about?  
Who is/are my readers-/ listeners?  
What information do I include?  
What language do I need for this genre & topic?  
How do I structure/organize my text presentation?  
What stylistic performance techniques can enhance my text delivery?  
How can I make the ~~composition~~ presentation better?*

### **Applying the process**

With those tweaks in place, the crucial task for me was to see how those key questions could be put to work in forming a sequence of lessons that would target the natural flow of decisions and tasks involved in planning, composing, and delivering an effective presentation. So, after quite a bit tinkering and a few more semesters of teaching, and the necessary editorial scrutiny that comes with writing a presentation skills course book, what has evolved naturally over time is a lesson framework that includes the following stages:

- *Exploring the topic to help students access their background knowledge and generate ideas they can use later to plan their own presentation*
- *Focusing on language to highlight useful vocabulary, expressions and sentence patterns that would naturally occur in the context of speaking about the target topic*
- *Organizing ideas to develop awareness of how ideas are brainstormed, selected and then slotted into the structure of an outline*
- *Adding impact to the body (main content) of a presentation with a strong introduction and conclusion*
- *Developing presentation techniques to enhance the delivery of a presentation through the effective use of note cards and visual aids, eye contact, body language, and the voice.*

Of course, the above lesson sequence has evolved in tandem with my own teaching experiences, my views of language learning, and my preferred teaching style. However, I'm well aware that there are several different, yet equally viable approaches and structures that can be used to design a presentation skills course, depending on the goals, the context, and the needs of the students. With all of them, the key feature will always be to provide students with a readily transferable set of tools and skills they can use independently to plan and give effective presentations on a range of topics in a variety of situations.

## **References**

*Murray, D: Write to Learn, pp. 5–6, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1990.*

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