Oral Presentations as a Communicative Activity

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The skill of public speaking has been for the most part overlooked in our adult level EFL classrooms. English teachers have been so concerned with the linguistic preparation of our learners that we have forgotten to provide them with the chance to use the language for more than answering a teacher-directed question, participate in group work or give a random opinion during the class. The ability to give an oral presentation is a necessary skill for any professional or future professional and especially now in Mexico; it can help expand and practice those linguistic skills that teachers are so interested in developing. Also, repeated exposure to classroom oration fosters self-confidence, practices clear articulation, cultivates better library research skills, promotes careful preparation for the use of the language, provides authentic listening practice and motivates the students to communicate.

Some teachers may already be including student presentations in their courses but many do little more than assign a topic and provide class time. Most EFL teachers have been well-trained in the grammatical code and the teaching of the English language but few are aware of the aspects involved in the instruction of public speaking. This is possibly because it has always been considered a skill principally for native speakers and the texts tend to ignore it as a worthwhile EFL ability. Oral presentations can be acquired by the student as systematically as any other point on your syllabus and with a lot more fun and genuine communication being used. As to teaching methodology, all four language skills are present in the preparation and delivery of the speech. When the students are familiar with the aspects of oral presentations, the classroom becomes more learner-centered and the teacher is free to act ask a resource person while the students prepare their speeches.

The remainder of this article will briefly discuss the most important aspects of public speaking that are necessary for the teacher and young adult or adult EFL students to know in order to initiate the skill in the classroom. Following this discussion, some suggestions for classroom practice activities which the teacher can easily adapt or expand in order to design new classroom speaking activities will be mentioned.

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Important Aspects to Consider

Adequate preparation for a speech is much more than insisting that the students visit a library to gather material and the organizing of that material. Good preparation involves understanding the audience and the occasion for the speech, identifying the purpose and correctly organizing the material to transmit the purpose to that particular audience for that specific occasion. It even involves choosing the correct kinds of visuals to transmit the ideas and being aware of one's particular body language indiosyncrasies when presenting in front of the group. It is the responsibility of the L2 speech instructor to aid the students in understanding and applying all these points.

Context

Conversations differ depending on where you are, what you are doing and with whom you are. A conversation between two lovers on a park bench is quite different from two friends having a discussion about a football game or the formal discourse between a teacher and a student. As the context changes so does the content and the manner with which it is given. In the same way, speeches differ with the context. According to Pearsall and Cunningham (1982: 319) when we refer to speech context, we usually are referring to **occasion** and **audience**.

When required to speak in front of a group it is a good idea to find out as much about the occasion as possible. We should make our students aware of the following questions about the occasion. How many speakers will there be? Where will your speech fit into the program? What is the purpose for the occasion? What will they expect from you? How many people are expected to attend? What are the restrictions of the room? Will they have the equipment you need for your speech?

They will also need to find out as much as possible about the audience (Pearsall and Cunningham: 321-322). How closely do they relate to the audience and vice/versa? The answer to this question will determine the level of formality for their speech. How much does the audience know about the topic? Their level of expertise will allow the speaker to correctly choose at what level (low high or high level of content knowledge) to prepare the speech. What does the audience expect of the speaker? Do they want to learn or be entertained?

After determining these variables, the mode of speech can be chosen. The four basic types are impromptu (spur-of-the-moment with no rehearsal time), memorized (speeches that must be repeated <u>many</u> times), written (for politicians or businessmen who do not want to make a misstatement), or extemporaneous (prepared, rehearsed beforehand but not read nor memorized). The mode the speaker chooses is determined by his occasion and audience.

Purpose and content

Determining the purpose for giving the speech also determines the content. In other words, if a speech is designed to persuade the audience that a product or method of doing something is better than what they are using or doing, the content of the speech should be organized around the positive elements not the negative. In general, most purposes for speeches are either to inform, persuade, amuse or welcome. In fact, most speeches contain two or more of these elements, but with only one principle purpose. When the purpose is clear, then the specific content can be chosen always focusing on the needs and expectations of the audience.

Organization

The preceding considerations will affect the organization of the material presented in the speech. The speaker needs to let the audience know what to expect and how the information will be presented. Once they have a good idea of the organization they can better organize the information. The majority of students are aware of preparing first an introduction and lastly a concluding remark to their paragraphs/compositions, however, they will need to be taught that these differ in speeches. First the use of attention-getting devices probably needs to be mentioned to students. Also, the idea of identifying the topic and purpose, letting the audience know what to expect from the speech and how the speaker plans to present his information by stating the order of the subdivisions of the body will probably need explicit class time teaching.

In most speeches for the purpose of EFL students the body of the presentation will be organized along a general to specific plan. Since most programs teach main ideas (generalizations) and examples (supporting evidence), this type of format should pose the fewest problems. There are other types of speeches that do not follow the general-specific organization, such as process descriptions or analytical business reports, but these should be approached after the students have acquired a higher level of "speech proficiency".

A conclusion in a longer more formal speech usually consists of a short summary of the main points to leave the listeners thinking of the entire picture rather than the last details. This arrangement uses the natural tendency of the audience to listen more carefully at the beginning, and at the end to remember what they have heard last (Sherman and Johnson 1975: 304-305). Recommendations and/or a concluding statement should also be taught for analytical or persuasive speeches. The students must learn that for no reason will they end by simply saying: "That's all!!!"

Visual aids

As in reading or writing a long report, visuals are indispensable in speaking in front of a group. They add variety and interest to the presentations, support and clarify the points being made, keep the audience's attention and provide the support the speaker needs to support and clarify a point being made. Visual aids come in many shapes and sizes. There are movies, slides, acetates, drawings or charts and graphs, handouts, etc. The main point to remember is that they are only aids and not substitutes for the talk.

There are three important criteria for the preparation and judging of visuals: visibility, simplicity and clarity, and control (Connolly 1968: 54-55). Visibility refers to the fact that the visual does no good to the speaker or the audience if it cannot be seen. For this reason the speaker must be especially careful of electronic equipment since it is not unusual for the lights to go off or the plugs not to work at the most critical times. The blackboard can be useful for impromptu speeches but it is time consuming and tends not to be well-executed during a prepared speech. The cheapest visuals and in many cases the best for classroom purposes are hand drawn posters or flip charts. However, the speaker must be careful to make the letters large enough to be seen. The rule indicates that each letter or number must be a half inch in height for each 20 feet of distance. Also an inappropriate choice of color, such as yellow or pink, that no one can see at a distance, can ruin the best prepared speech.

Clarity and simplicity means that the audience should be able to glance quickly at the printed material and immediately understand its meaning. For this reason many diagrams, charts or tables are perfect in magazines where the reader has time to study them to derive meaning, but they would be disastrous as a poster. The poster must be simple and uncomplicated in order to transmit a clear idea. Even though a visual may not be complicated, the speaker must not forget to point out all its salient features. This will enable the audience to understand it faster and the speaker will not lose contact with them if they are focusing on the chart while the speaker continues on to another point. For this reason, the visual aid should be withdrawn from view as soon as the speaker has completed discussing the information it illustrates.

In visuals, control refers to the control of the audience through a well prepared and used visual. A properly made visual will increase the audience's concentration on the speaker and the speech and draw attention to the points that the speaker emphasizes and wants the audience to understand. Also, the visuals assist the speaker in presenting the speech. If the speaker forgets what point is to be covered next, he only needs to glance at the posters in order to remind himself of the order. The factor of audience attention is a reason why handouts should be

avoided. The audience cannot listen or understand well while passing out the papers, and few can resist reading the handout instead of listening.

Body language

The aspect of body language in public speaking is possibly one of the most difficult for students to acquire. They may be totally aware of what they should and should not do, but at the moment of the actual presentation, they become nervous and commit exactly the error that they told themselves not to do. This instructor has had the most success in teaching this point by first dividing the most important errors made into three areas (listed below), having a class discussion concerning examples of specific errors usually made in these areas, acting them out in the front of the group and finally providing student suggested topics to practice with short (1-2 minutes) impromptu speeches during which time the other class members will note body language problem areas. These peer evaluations are written anonymously on small pieces of paper with the speaker's name on the outside and left on the teacher's desk for the speakers to collect after the class. Peer comments are very valuable in correcting problem areas; perhaps more so than teacher comments. Also, this method works very well for practicing any of the aforementioned aspects of oral presentations.

This author has subdivided the area of body language into what she has found to be the three most problematic areas: eye contact, voice and body movements. Good eye contact is a difficult skill to acquire quickly because if they make correct eye contact they realize how many are in the audience which, in turn, makes them nervous and they could forget their speech. Eye contact requires practice in being in front of a group. However, it does help to give an alternative to those who cannot at first look at their classmates while giving a presentation. If, in a small class, they practice looking at a point just over the tops of the heads of the audience, they will not make eye contact nor will they see their classmates looking at them. This is not as noticeable for the audience as staring at a light bulb on the ceiling or looking out the door while speaking although it is not the most advisable technique to continue with. With practice and more self-confidence the speaker can improve.

The area of the control of voice quality is also an important point. If the audience cannot hear the speaker due to poor articulation or if the speech contains too many "uhh's", "ahh's", or "este's" the message is affected. Serious problems in this area do not occur with all students and after evaluating which students need the most assistance, special help can be provided after class or while others are working in groups. This point will also become more acceptable through teacher guidance, peer evaluations and practice.

Excessive body movements by the speaker are also a distraction for the audience. In this category, among other errors, fall moving watches, rings or bracelets, pacing back and forth while speaking, and exaggerated hand movements. Also, the lack of body movement can be considered an error because the audience does not wish to see a speaker who stands as stiff as a statue and does not move at all. The best advise to give students is that any movement in excess is not recommendable during a speech.

Perhaps the most important aspect of body language is the speaker's attitude which is almost impossible to disguise. It will show in the speakers choice of words, in posture, gestures, and tone of voice. Fear of speaking to an audience is a feeling that every speaker has felt and is common even after years of practice. This "fear" can be avoided in two ways. First, a speaker must be confident in the knowledge of the material that they will present. This knowledge can be gained by practice and reviewing all the pertinent information until they have no doubts about it. Second, the speaker should have no doubt about the value or interest of the information to the audience. The confidence they gain also helps them avoid the distracting mannerisms that many people have when they first begin public speaking.

Grading Methodology

Assigning a number or letter grade to any student as a final product for all their effort in a course is always a frustrating process and often more a sad than a happy one. Grading oral presentations as with any grading tends to be very subjective unless we, the teachers, provide the control in the form of an evaluation form such as the one provided in the appendix. The author has found that the use of grading forms where all the elements taught are included and which all the students have had prior access to is a more desirable alternative. This makes the teachers' job easier and eliminates or at least lessens the possibility of grading students lower or higher than they deserve due to teacher subjectivity.

The sample evaluation form provided in the appendix is one that this teacher uses because it best reflects the areas which are the most emphasized in her class and the value of the assigned points she has found to be best. Each teacher should design one that would best fit his or her particular situation.

Classroom Practice Activities and Ideas

Obviously a teacher wishing to include oral presentation activities in their classrooms would not make the first speech a 10-15 minute presentation concerning a complicated topic in their professions or possible future careers. As with all teaching we should follow the simple to difficult pattern and the known to unknown arrangement of material and skills. The impromptu speeches being rather

simple to execute and needing less preparation time can provide a wealth of worthwhile but fun practice. The best way for the teacher to acquire a variety of topics of impromptu speaking that the students would be interested in is to do the obvious and ask the students. Of course, it may be necessary for you to help make their suggestions more specific since it would be difficult for a student to organize and discuss in two minutes the topic of *Pollution*; however, he could if given the topic of *The worst causes of air pollution in Mexico City.* All the topics would require a personal opinion so there is no right or wrong and they should be topics that all members of the class know something about and are interested in. As previously mentioned, the impromptu speeches should always be anonymously peer evaluated, not teacher evaluated. The evaluations should be restricted to specific points that the class has been discussing, such as the area of introductions or body language.

Another form of practicing for speeches would be by using role plays of parts of speeches to aid in reducing the jitters during the actual speeches. For example, after the aspect of speech introductions has been taught, two students can be chosen to prepare a two-minute introduction for a speech which they can read to the class. Each should exemplify the correct organization of an introduction, but each should have a content and purpose that are different. For example, one student could exemplify a correct introduction for a literary meeting of a neighborhood ladies' club and the other also a correct introduction, but for a totally different audience, such as a convention of mechanics expecting to learn new techniques for working on computerized cars. The audience (class) who was not told what type of introduction to expect would determine for whom each introduction was meant and discuss how it could be made better. They should especially include in their discussion the considerations of occasion, audience, content, and purpose as well as organization. This type of activity can also be used for practicing conclusions and body organization.

Role play can also be used as a fun practice for body language. Several students can work as a group preparing one speech (1-2 minutes); however, each will choose different body language problem areas to exemplify while they read the speech. The audience's job is to locate those errors for discussion later.

In order to practice making visuals the teacher can give one topic for the entire class, divide the class into small groups of 2-3 in order to allow students to plan their visuals and during the next class period they can make their posters. The purpose is to see which group has the best visuals as decided by class vote. The criteria would, of course, be the same as discussed in class.

Each time aspects of oral presentations are practiced in the classroom, even though the assignments increase in difficulty, the students become more confident and feel more at ease in the front of the group. Another interesting idea

is product descriptions for pair or small group presentations. As a basis, new product blurbs from weekly magazines, such as *Time* or *Newsweek,* can be used. Again the class should be divided but each time into smaller groups to allow more opportunity for each student to be in front of the class. Each pair or group is given a description of a product that has been cut from one of the magazines. They must prepare a description of the product and of its manner of operation without providing its name. If the students have already studied processes and their descriptions for a writing class, then the same format or outline can be used, but for oral presentations. If not, the teacher should provide one or help the students develop it, depending on the level of the students. At this point in their preparation, students should face the audience and give their portion of the description without the aid of notes since they should have visuals and need not speak for more than two or two and a half minutes each. If the members of the class cannot identify the product, audience questioning should be encouraged until it is correctly named.

The next step requires more creative thinking and must be done in small groups of 2-4 students. They must develop their own ideas for wacky inventions, describe them, using visuals, and produce television commercials for their products which, of course, are acted out in front of the class. Again this activity involves the use of the four skills and can be fun for all, since by this time the members of the class feel comfortable with each other and with being in the front of an audience. They are not in competition with the others and want to produce the most original product.

The final step to more formal, analytical extemporaneous presentations depends on the particular circumstances of each setting. The best situation would be close access to a library containing books, magazines and professional journals; however, many students may already have materials in their homes, since the topics should be about fields they are interested in. If a library is to be used, the instructor may need to incorporate library skills into the course before beginning.

Each teacher must set the restrictions concerning minimum length, number of sources to be used, types of visuals, topics, etc. depending on their situation and goals. Students should bring their necessary materials to the classroom so the work can be done with the teacher present in case of problems. The students should be required to only organize their speech using a specific outline and not to write out the speech since there is too great a chance that the student will attempt to memorize it. The use of notecards consisting of a simplified outline should be encouraged during the presentation. Above all, the teacher should encourage the students to develop an informal extemporaneous speech, one in which the speaker expresses himself in an honest and candid personal manner.

Conclusion

Public speaking is a skill that improves with practice and students need ample opportunity to perfect it. Classroom motivation also improves as the skill is polished and the students see the activity as a chance for genuine communication as the language class becomes more learner-centered. It is not necessary that oral presentations be the center of the curriculum, but should be included as one element of the program that complements the others. A good speech depends on the same careful use of the linguistic rules that all the other skills require. Using oral presentations in your classes during the course can provide an optional means of using the second language in a relevant and enjoyable activity.

References

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Appendix

Oral Report Evaluation Form

Name _____ Time Began _____ Time Ended _____

Topic _____

I. Content (60 pts)

Introduction:
The topic identified without being explicitly stated   (5) _____
Indicated the order to be discussed in the body   (5) _____

Body:
Logical order   (5) _____
Smooth transition   (5) _____
Vocabulary not at a high level   (5) _____
Grammar not disruptive   (5) _____
Knew the topic well   (5) _____
Explained the topic completely   (5) _____

Conclusion:
Ending anticipated without being directly stated   (5) _____
Short summary provided   (5) _____
Conclusion or recommendations given   (5) _____

Time limit: (8-10 minutes)
respected   (5) _____

II. Posters (30 pts)

Visibility   (10) _____
Simplicity and clarity   (10) _____
Control   (10) _____

III. Body Language (10 pts)

Eye contact   (4) _____
Body movements (too little/too much)   (3) _____
Voice (high/low/ahh's/etc.)   (3) _____

IV. Other comments:

_____
_____
_____
                                                         Grade _____