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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION - DEVELOPING
PRESENTATION SKILLS

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Abstract

This endeavour is part of a broader project, which will materialize in a students' book. It is designed in an attempt to help them improve their communication, presentation and public speaking skills on the one hand, and to enhance their self-esteem and confidence on the other, thus boosting their marketability when they leave school and enter the workforce. The present paper introduces the rationale and the methodology used in teaching the structure, rules and strategies of effective oral presentations to non-native ESP students in general and Business English students in particular. Subsumed under the category of important professional skills, presentation skills are regarded as a prerequisite of the present-day working environment in addition to hard skills and formal qualifications. A good command of English and an excellent ability of expressing the desired message or presenting a view or an idea clearly, concisely and confidently increases considerably students' chances for future employment.

Keywords: presentation skills; public speaking skills; intercultural communication skills;

1. INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the area of specialization, ESP students are occasionally required to make presentations in today's learning environment as the academic curriculum does not place a great emphasis on this aspect. In addition, the majority of students are reluctant about speaking in public, experiencing fear and anxiety. Presenting in a foreign language increases even more the level of anxiety as language proficiency is greatly impacting the quality of presentation. However, a good preparation, rigorous planning, solid knowledge on the topic and a lot of practice may ensure a good impression on the audience.

There are many reasons why undergraduates should learn how to plan and deliver successful presentations. They will rely on these skills when they have to present their research papers at international conferences or their final results in theses and dissertations when they graduate and especially when they have to prepare and give interview job presentations.

In today's business environment, many cultural identities meet and cooperate. Business professionals need to know how to interact their foreign partners, to face the challenges of cross-cultural challenges and to understand their cultural heritages.

Since today's students are tomorrow's professionals, it is important to teach them how to plan and deliver effective presentations. It is common knowledge that oral presentations are required in various industries of the present-day business environment, ranging from business, sales, marketing, media, financial services to public relations and graphic design. Even if the reasons for delivering oral presentations are very diverse, students should be equipped with the proper vocabulary and techniques and teachers should constantly assist them in developing their communication and public speaking skills.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

It is worth noting here that ESP students are increasingly aware that they need to acquire certain competences and qualifications in order to better compete in the current working environment. Needless to say, they dread giving oral presentations.

Previous studies (Fallows and Steven, 2000, Živković, 2014, Wallwork, 2010 and others) show that employment requirements have changed in today's working environment, shifting focus from the traditional formal qualifications that demonstrate theory learning to work-related practical skills and competences.

As Fallows and Steven (2000) put it "today's challenging economic situation means that it is no longer sufficient for a new graduate to have knowledge of an academic subject; increasingly it is necessary for students to gain those skills which will enhance their prospects of employment. Employability skills include the following abilities: the retrieval and handling of information; communication and presentation; planning and problem solving; and social development and interaction."

In order to be better equipped to meet the requirements of today's constantly-changing and highly competitive work environment, undergraduates must be taught to communicate effectively so as to persuade, convince and inspire so as to maintain their competitive advantage. The more they learn about planning a presentation and the more they practice, the greater the level of confidence needed to have an impact on the audience.

These soft skills are universally assessed and highly sought by hiring managers nowadays, who have high expectations from potential employees.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The present research is a more practical approach, placing the emphasis on the importance of oral presentations in developing students' assertive communication ability.

Teaching students how to plan and give effective and persuasive oral presentations mainly aims at developing specific knowledge and skills required for employment and at achieving the following objectives:

- acquire new specialized vocabulary
- learn to use transitional words and phrases to create link between ideas (comparison, contrast, cause and effect, exemplification, conclusion and others)
- learn to plan and write a presentation
- improve documentation and research techniques
- improve public speaking skills
- develop argumentation skills (giving counterarguments in a convincing manner)
- increase students' confidence
- learn to adapt their posture and use gestures
- control body language and eye-contact in order to transmit confidence
- develop assertive communicative competence
- develop the ability to choose the appropriate language register or to move easily from one register to another (formal, neutral, informal)

- learn to deal with questions
- develop students' ability to evaluate a presentation and determine them to be self-critical
- develop the ability to use technology to produce a presentation
- develop intercultural or cross-cultural communication skills, (acknowledging cultural differences facilitates cooperation in a multicultural environment).

It is therefore the ESP teacher's challenging task to provide an interdisciplinary approach to teaching oral presentations in order to overcome anxiety and increase confidence among undergraduates.

4. RESEARCH METHODS

In order to be able to competently and professionally express themselves, students need to be taught certain aspects of speaking in public. Before embarking upon planning their presentation they need to find out as much as they can about their audience (nationality, age, etc.) and to determine the level of knowledge about the topic they will enlarge upon.

When cultural backgrounds interact, they must take some other factors into account such as hand gestures or facial expressions that might be perceived as offensive, jokes must be carefully selected and national stereotypes should be avoided.

Since preparation and knowledge are crucial for minimizing anxiety, a greater emphasis should be placed on these aspects. Thus, students are instructed to get familiar with the material they intend to talk about and to define the target objectives of their presentation. After gathering as much information as possible, the next step is to select the relevant information and to plan the presentation by focusing on the body of the presentation, a captivating introduction and memorable concluding remarks.

My research is based on an experiment that involved all my students enrolled in Business English seminars, taking into account their needs and interests. Thus, first year Business English students (136) were required to compare and contrast two products at their choice in a 15-minute presentation prepared individually. The experiment also involved the second year undergraduates of International Relations and European Studies (24) who were expected to be able to accurately and objectively describe graphs and charts whereas third year students in International Relations (23) were instructed to prepare a fully-fledged presentation for a job interview. The present study presents the findings of observing and assessing the presentations delivered by 136 first year Business English students.

An entire seminar was devoted to introducing the proper vocabulary, main stages of planning a presentation, the principles of presenting, exploring the body-language and the importance of eye-contact in a presentation, enlarging upon do's and don'ts and presenting mistakes made by others. Students were also instructed to take into consideration cultural identity and cultural experience when presenting to a multicultural audience.

Moreover, special attention was devoted to introducing the basic rules of a PowerPoint presentation. An important aspect that must not be overlooked is proofreading the slides for spelling and grammatical errors, failing to do so can have a negative impact upon the audience.

Students were welcome to share their experience and to make comments. At the end of the seminar they were explained how to assess a presentation, taking into account several aspects such as greetings and introduction, clarity of presentation, originality, body language, use of visual aids, dealing with questions, relevance of concluding remarks and others. Starting with the next seminar they were expected to deliver their own presentations and to evaluate their colleagues' performance. The novelty of this research lies in the fact that students objectively evaluated and graded presentations, receiving an evaluation form.

Therefore, students were expected to choose the appropriate vocabulary but advised to keep it clear and simple, bearing in mind that the level of English in the audience might be heterogeneous. Furthermore, they should be able to talk about the selected topic and not to read the material contained in the slides or notes. Therefore the meaning and pronunciation of difficult words must be rigorously checked using online resources.

After greeting the audience and introducing themselves and the selected topic, students are advised to keep the audience focused by using various attention-grabbers such as questions, rhetorical

questions, interesting statistics, quotes and even self-deprecating humour or comments, which are regarded as safer than jokes that may offend the audience. Also they may use gestures (non-verbal communication) to welcome the audience and to show determination and enthusiasm. However, since there are students from other cultures under the Erasmus exchange programme, certain gestures that might be perceived as disrespectful in other cultures should be avoided (such as the OK hand gesture or pointing a finger to someone, which are regarded as offensive in Turkey).

Moreover, the use of technology is highly recommended for oral presentations and students are encouraged to make use of visuals, which seem to be more appealing to people's minds. The number of slides is limited and students' task is to present, discuss and convince to make an impact on the audience, maintaining their enthusiasm throughout the presentation.

It is worth noting here that according to the theory of nonverbal communication developed by Albert Mehrabian in the 1960s, the assertiveness in communication is more about body language than the selection of words. Thus, a great emphasis is placed on eye-contact, gestures, facial expression and posture – 55%, tone of voice – 38% (that should not gradually be reduced to monotone) whereas the selection of words accounts for only 7 %.

After the concluding remarks in which they are expected to reiterate the main ideas and to emphasize the key words of their presentation, the next step is to invite questions. If there are no questions, the best way to avoid the uncomfortable moments of silence is to mention the aspects people are usually interested in or want to find out more.

Another related aspect that worth mentioning here is dealing with questions. Since the audience is entirely made up of colleagues, malicious questions can hardly be raised. Nevertheless undergraduates should be instructed how to avoid difficult questions. In our experiment there were questions addressed by students who were interested in finding out more about a topic. As a rule, undergraduates should be advised to anticipate questions and if a presenter does not know the answer, it is better not to improvise but to show his/her willingness to research more.

5. FINDINGS

All my students responded well to this assignment, delivering presentations in a lively and interesting way. Even students with limited knowledge of English enjoyed these presentations, choosing topics they were interested in and felt comfortable with such as comparing and contrasting types of phones, computers, beauty products, black tea vs. green tea, white chocolate vs. black chocolate. Intermediate and upper-intermediate chose more challenging topics such as presenting the types of human behaviour (introvert, extrovert and ambivert) or comparing and contrasting two popular American medical television drama series Grey's Anatomy and House. However the tendency was to speak more about the topic they chose, going over the time allocated for each presentation.

My students from Moldova demonstrated a strong cultural identity. The four Erasmus students (three from Turkey, one from Portugal) that attended my seminars chose to present their countries, insisting on the places that worth visiting.

Both beginners and intermediate students chose to stand and face the audience and tell the story using their own words instead of sitting and reading the slides. Some avoided eye-contact at the beginning of their presentations betraying their lack of confidence but due to positive feedback and a more comfortable public speaking environment, they became more confident and relaxed. Others crossed their arms thus showing a defensive attitude and lack of confidence. A few displayed some nervous habits such as twirling the hair or playing with the pen and fidgeting. Some of them felt more comfortable standing still, others shifted the body weight from one foot to another whereas one student chose to walk too fast and too long distracting attention. Once these aspects were brought to their attention, they corrected their posture immediately, standing straight, shoulders back, head up facing the audience and smiling.

At the end of every presentation, everyone applauded. My students proved to be excellent assessors, providing objective feedback and asking pertinent questions demonstrating their genuine interest in the topic. The grades they gave were about how well the presenter designed and delivered the presentation, overlooking small grammar mistakes.

My students' feedback regarding this interactive activity was that it incorporated genuine communication and it was much more challenging than learning specialized vocabulary through traditional teaching methods. As adults and future professionals, they are genuinely interested in personal development. The task of evaluating their colleague's presentations enabled them to learn from the mistakes made by others and to challenge them to deliver better presentations.

There are people who are born with a natural aptitude for public speaking and effective communication. Specialists believe that these skills can be learned and constantly developed. In this respect, out of 136 presentations, five of my students impressed me with their inborn talent for public speaking, less than ten will never pursue a career that might require oral presentations (including two cases of glossophobia) but the majority of students were eager to learn more, discuss and do better.

Nevertheless, they concurred with the fact that it was a new, motivating experience and a better way to construct knowledge, thus displaying a more positive attitude towards learning.

6. CONCLUSION

As research has demonstrated, teaching oral presentations to ESP students is a complex, challenging and multidimensional process which exceeds the sphere of linguistics as it also involves teaching certain aspects related to non-verbal communication, which are of the utmost importance such as physical behaviour, posture and manner in which the verbal message is conveyed in order to ensure the maximum impact. Since the business world is made up of different cultures that communicate in the same language, cultural differences and possible misunderstandings must also be rigorously discussed.

Since oral presentations imply multi-skills, developing these soft skills in ESP students has become a necessity in today's working environment. When entering the labour market they are expected to have acquired solid work-related practical knowledge and excellent communication skills and to be able to apply them to future endeavours.

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