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“Integrating Presentation Skills Into Business English Classes”

Training presentation skills is aimed at “developing the communication skills of would-be speakers as well as enhancing the existing skills of professional speakers” [<http://www.businesstrainingdirect.co.uk/references/public-speaking-training-22-11-07.php>] and these skills are usually trained separately.

“The dominant approach to this kind of training is the situational and practical approach. In this kind of public speaking training, the participants are given different scenarios and themes to speak on. Public speaking training uses both repetitive and varied learning methodologies, both in the cognitive and the psychomotor domains. It has two main objectives, the first of which is to eliminate, or at least minimize, the fear and anxiety of being on stage. The second objective is to equip the participants with guides to verbal and non-verbal mannerisms that will help them break through the perceived difficulty of public speaking” [<http://www.businesstrainingdirect.co.uk/references/public-speaking-training-22-11-07.php>].

With today’s enormous pool of information expanding every minute, employers requiring of applicants to possess practical skills, for example, presentation skills and with no change of the number of academic hours for studies in sight, it is absolutely imperative to incorporate the element of practical skills into the core subject, in this case, Business English (BE). Universities abroad practice teaching these two subjects (Business English and presentation skills) separately. Another motivating factor for this integration to occur in Higher School of Economics is the final English exam format. Students are to present the synopsis of their graduation project in English. Thus, the faculty has found it important to introduce the training of presentation skills into BE classes for second-year students.

The textbooks: the BE classes were conducted using the textbook “English for Business Studies” by Ian Mackenzie (the 2nd edition) once a week. It was agreed to take certain parts of the textbook “English for Presentations” by Maria Grussendorf to teach presentation skills once in two weeks.

It was suggested that presentation skills will be integrated into the BE course for sophomores. The reasons why second-year students were chosen are as follows:

- 1) The curriculum comprises four years. But in the middle of the fourth year of studies students are to present the synopsis of their term paper in English. Thus, by that time they should already have good presentation skills and plenty of time to practice to present their reports in public. Therefore, fourth-year students were excluded from the project.
- 2) First-year students were also excluded as, first, they need time to get used to the studying practices, then, their knowledge of English may vary which creates inequality among students regarding their ability to express their thoughts in English freely, without visible constraints and that poses a triple problem for them: learning new business concepts, learning English in a more profound way and learning to present. It was assumed to be too much workload to handle for freshmen.
- 3) So, the debate concerned whether the faculty should incorporate presentation skills in the second or third year of studies. In both years students have BE classes. The decision was made in favour of sophomores for two reasons: a) the integration will take approximately half a year and students need plenty of time and topics to practice to present in public. The earlier the incorporation starts, the more opportunities students will have and b) the third year of studies was secured to teach academic writing skills so that students are fully equipped to write and present their final term paper in the fourth year of their studies.

The reasons why BE classes were chosen are the following:

- 1) The curriculum comprises General English (GE) in the first and second years of studies, BE in the first three years of studies, Country Studies (CS) in the second year of studies, Media Discourse in the third year of studies, ESP and BEC classes in the fourth year of studies. As the project was agreed to start with second-year students, the faculty was to decide whether to choose GE, BE or CS classes.

CS classes were discarded as this course is very extensive and intensive that it was difficult to incorporate teaching presentation skills without either shortening the course considerably or shifting part of the material taught for a student's individual studies which will lead to overloading students with extra-curriculum assignments and, consequently, possible worsening of their emotional well-being and / or academic performance.

- 1) After graduating students will be specializing in Economics or International Affairs (the department provides instruction for two specialties). As GE will not be students' field of expertise, it was considered not wise to teach students to present on topics which will hardly ever become the focus of their attention at work.
- 2) Besides, GE classes last only for two years which means that in the third year students would have to switch to a new course to practice their presentation skills. To ensure continuity it was decided to choose BE classes as, first, second-year students are already familiar with the basic business concepts and they will have more topics to present on in the third year of studies as BE classes continue for three years.

After studying a number of textbooks on presentation skills it was concluded that there are nine main points about a presentation to consider:

- 1) preparation
- 2) the speaker's behavior when presenting (posture, hands, etc.)
- 3) the introduction (its structure);
- 4) signposting
- 5) linking words
- 6) summary and conclusion
- 7) visuals
- 8) describing graphs
- 9) handling questions

As a result, eight classes every two weeks cover the first term. So, by its end students were supposed to be familiar with the theory and to have done some practice. The full-time practice was scheduled for the second term.

Now the nine points will be looked at in more detail. The first point is preparation. "People say that overpreparation leads to fear of public speaking. It will have adverse effects on one's presentation skills. Concerning oneself too much with preparation will create stress, which will affect the presenting ability" [<http://www.businesstrainingdirect.co.uk/references/how-to-improve-your-presentation-skills-22-08-08.php>]. But this does not mean that no preparation is needed to talk in front of the public. Even great public speakers will prepare their speech and practice before they present it to the audience" [<http://www.businesstrainingdirect.co.uk/references/change-your-attitude-to-overcome-fear-of-public-speaking-14-07-08.php>]. It helps to eliminate a little bit the element of unpredictability, to structure the thoughts and, consequently, to make the speech easier to comprehend and to be within the time frame imposed on by the circumstances. The preparation includes not only writing the speech itself but also getting ready to 'come on stage'.

As for writing the speech, there are three main points to make. First, the topic a presenter has chosen should be the one he/she feels strongly about. As Brian Tracy, a professional speaker, says in his blog "It is to think through the subjects that have had an extraordinary impact on you, the subjects that you would like to share with others because you intensely feel that others could benefit from your knowledge" [<http://www.briantracy.com/blog/personal-success/effective-communication-public-speaking-and-presentation-skills/>] or . "unless you are convinced about the content yourselves it is difficult to carry the audience with you" [<http://www.businesstrainingdirect.co.uk/references/proper-elements-of-presentation-skills-08-09-08.php>]. Second, before starting to write, the presenter should answer the following questions: "Who is my audience, and what effect do I want my talk to have upon them?". People believe that it is enough to have an entertaining and interesting presentation to grab the audience's

attention. True it may be, but the talk must also have an objective. Besides, “the required content must be customized to that particular audience for effective results. Wrong targeting [...] will render the presentation useless” [<http://www.businesstrainingdirect.co.uk/references/proper-elements-of-presentation-skills-08-09-08.php>]. And, third, the speaker should do the research. He/she might have enough knowledge on the topic to share but it would be wise to display a variety of opinions expressed by experts in the field.

As for the second part of the preparation stage, it can further be divided into two sections: one has to get ready, first, emotionally and, second, technically. Every second person has a stage fright. According to Brian Tracy, “Fifty-four percent of American adults rank public speaking ahead of fear of death among life’s major fears” [<http://www.briantracy.com/blog/personal-success/effective-communication-public-speaking-and-presentation-skills/>], that is why, first, one has to overcome this fear. Practice makes perfect. Thus, by practicing making presentation in general and by practicing the speech in question one can boost his/her confidence and reduce the amount of stress one might experience when performing. The second thing one has to take into consideration is to familiarize oneself with the surroundings he/she is going to present in, if it is possible: to check the room and equipment, try out the presentation so as to see whether one can carry the voice far, etc.

The way to convey this information to students varies. One can deliver a lecture or ask to do extensive reading before holding a discussion on the topic. The choice depends on the time available and the group.

The second point is the way the speaker behaves when presenting. The presenter’s speech may be brilliant but if he/she is stiff and monotonous or, on the opposite, too lively and high-pitched, it may spoil the positive impression from his/her talk. Consequently, one should also know how to stand, what to do with his/her hands and how to deliver his/her voice. Unless one is born an excellent public speaker, the right way to deliver the speech comes with practice. Few students perform well the first couple of times that is why ticking points off for poor prosodic and non-verbal performance at the very beginning is counter-productive.

The first two topics – the preparation and the behavior when presenting – are covered at one lesson. No presentation is yet required from students.

The third point is introduction. It is mostly for the benefit of the audience: it presents the speaker and his/her affiliation, the time allotted for the speech and the time to ask questions and, most importantly, the outline of his/her talk that is what to expect.

Students are told a seven-point structure of the introduction, that is followed by a discussion what each point covers (the professor refers them to the textbook by Maria Grussendorf). At home they prepare an introduction for a talk on the topic offered to them by their professor. The topic is based on the issues students tackle when studying the text-book by Ian Mackenzie at that moment (this textbook will serve as a reference point for topics throughout the whole course on presentation skills). This year they happened to be discussing different types of company structure that is why they were asked to prepare a talk about the structure of any company they choose or of the university they are currently studying at.

The fourth and fifth points are signposting and linking words. Presentation skills sometimes are regarded in their narrow sense that is how to act out the speech in front of an audience live. But presenting is not only about performing, it is also about arranging your thoughts and ideas in a certain sequence. Signposting signals the transitions from one part of the talk to another and, thus, keeps the speech clear and lucid. Linking words provide logical links and, thus, show the relations between ideas in the talk. Although they are separate topics and are covered in two classes, only after that students are asked to prepare a talk on one of the topics of their choice from the topics offered. They are required to employ a wide range of linking words and signposting. Already at this stage they receive appraisal (not assessment). The professor can do it the first time to re-enforce the assessment criteria that have been established and discussed previously. The other option is to ask students to evaluate their peer’s performance and comment

on it. It is essential to enhance the idea that when evaluating they should comment not only on what was wrong but also on what was good in the presentation.

The sixth point is writing the summary and conclusion. Some people do not see the difference between them, thus, rendering it obligatory to teach this difference. The summary is especially necessary if the talk is long. At the beginning the speaker has told the audience what he/she is going to talk about. At the end it is time to recap to remind the audience what he/she has told them. In other words, the summary is re-phrased introduction of the talk that one has presented at the beginning. The conclusion, on the other hand, means outlining inferences and prospects of his/her further research. After studying the difference students prepare a complete talk with the introduction, the main body in which they use linking words and signposting, the summary and conclusion. At this stage besides peer-to-peer appraisal they receive professor's assessment with explanation of the grade.

The seventh and eighth points are designing visuals and describing graphs. Visuals should serve as scaffolding for the speaker but they should not dominate or copy word for word what one is saying. As entertaining as it may sound, trainers / coaches speak of 'death by PowerPoint'. PowerPoint must be used to emphasize ideas rather than as the meat of the speech. Graphs are a part of the speaker's visuals and there are certain rules how to describe them so as to sound logical and comprehensible. This includes not only the algorithm of presenting the message of a graph, a bar or a pie chart but also knowledge and ability to use synonyms so as to vary one's vocabulary and avoid monotonous repetition. These two topics are covered separately and students are offered an opportunity to present after each lesson. Thus, after learning the rules of designing slides students prepare a talk accompanied with a PowerPoint presentation and, after mastering the vocabulary and the structure when describing graphs they make a presentation that involves describing trends or statistics. At this point the professor may try peer-to-peer assessment. It can be done anonymously or not.

Handling questions (the last point) frightens most presenters as it introduces the element of unpredictability into one's presentation and no one wants to make a blunder when answering questions. So, certain tips how to tackle questions are in order. All the rules can be divided into two groups. First, one can prepare for the Q&A session by predicting possible questions or by pre-arranging questions that will be asked by 'people from the audience' but who, in fact, will be the speaker's colleagues or friends. Second, one should bear in mind certain tactics how to respond to different kinds of questions: hostile ones, comments, irrelevant ones, too long ones and so on. A good list of guidelines is given here: <http://www.bdv-skills.co.uk/Question And Answer Sessions.html>. At this phase to facilitate the Q&A session for students the professor can offer them to formulate their own topic based on the issue they are tackling at present at BE classes. In this case the student will know the angle from which to cover the topic better and he/she will be more enthusiastic about it than before when topics were handed out by the professor.

Two types of presentation were tried: live and recorded (PowerPoint presentation accompanied by an audio).

As it is agreed that one should start with the easiest and one should face fewer challenges at the beginning, it was decided to start with a recorded version (after students had mastered the structure of the introduction by presenting it in class). On the one hand, it lets students take their time when recording their talk, thus, eliminating any imperfections in the speech itself or the performance, they do not experience as much agitation as in front of an audience and it eliminates the only unpredictable element of the presentation that is handling questions as they are not interacting with an audience live. On the other hand, assuming that these young people, being born in a digital era, are digital natives is wrong. "The truth is that they tend to be natives at digital consumption, not digital production" [Lind 2012]. Thus, they encounter a new challenge: to master preparing presentations with sound-recording. After a couple of presentations prepared in this way students were asked to switch to live performances.

At the end of the academic year students were surveyed for their insight into the instruction they had received on presentation skills and the way it was done. The questions they were asked are the following: 1) Was the information shared by the professor sufficient to learn to make presentations successfully?; 2) Was the way it was delivered the most appropriate and comprehensible?; 3) Did you have enough practice?; 4) Do you approve of introducing recorded presentations into the course or learning it is unnecessary?; 5) What would you like to change in or add to the course?; 6) Do you find learning to present useful for your career prospects?

Answering the first two questions, students agreed that the information provided was enough and the way it was conveyed was appropriate. The attitude to the amount of practice they were exposed to differed. Every student had an opportunity to prepare three presentations in the first term and three more in the second one. Some students found it sufficient while others thought they needed more practice. The reason for this difference is not only whether these presentations were successful or not. Mostly it can be explained by students' personalities: outgoing and open students were eager to make more presentations than they had a chance to while reserved and self-conscious ones were satisfied with this number. As for question 4, almost 90% of the students (88.7%) surveyed did not approve of introducing a recorded presentation as they saw no apparent use of it in their future careers. Besides many of them faced technical challenge when recording their presentations. To question 5 several tips and observations were received. First, students expressed concern that they started making presentations too early and recommended to allow more time for analysis of already existing presentations of prominent people. Second, in some groups the idea of peer-to-peer appraisal and assessment did not appeal to students as they were afraid of offending their groupmates and thought that giving grades should be exclusively the professor's job. Third, many students (around 76%) wished they could offer the topics for presentations themselves (not handed down by the professor). As for usefulness of these skills for their career all the students agreed with this statement in one way or another: some students believed that they would be directly involved in arranging presentations in their prospective job, others thought that they might have to do it some time in the future.

The results of the pilot project are fairly good: by the end of the second term students have mastered the structure and vocabulary of a presentation very well. The fear of public speaking expressed by many students before lessened due to a fair amount of practice and students believed that if they continue making presentations they might get rid of it for good. Students were satisfied with the course and offered some features that can improve it for future sophomores. Lind's words about his project can be repeated here that "this course is highly valuable to a student's all-round development, in its teaching of critical thinking, meaning making, argument development, persuasion theory, gestural nuance, and so on" [Lind 2012].

This project proves that public speaking is an art that can be acquired, rather than something that one is born with.

References:

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