

Workshop: Learners speak out - A multi-disciplinary technique

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a course called 'Oral Presentation and Advanced Reading Skills' in higher education in Turkey. Subjects were 86 students from science and social sciences departments. Data was collected through responsive and holistic approaches. Results indicate that higher education learners consider a course on oral presentation skills as indispensable in higher education. Although highly motivated, external variables such as assessment, no sufficient amount of speaking skills during prior education in L2 may mean to adopt a speaking anxiety in front of an audience. Results suggest a need for practicing speaking skills in small groups by employing peer evaluation techniques.

Keywords: oral presentation skills, speaking anxiety, course evaluation, higher education.

Introduction

This workshop aims at introducing a course on 'Oral presentation and Advanced Reading Skills' offered at Middle East Technical University, Turkey. Also, it aims at introducing a peer evaluation technique that may facilitate developing oral presentation skills and gradually reduce speaking anxiety in front of an audience. Participants are expected to take part in activities employing a peer evaluation technique metaphorically called 'sandwich technique' that will provide them with an idea of how learners or presenters, who probably strike dread into their hearts when in front of an audience, can cope with it through practising speeches in small groups. It is expected that the 'sandwich technique' provides participants to construct tips for emerging issues during oral presentations that may guide them to effective oral presentations.

Oral Presentation Skills

Nice words can make the snake crawl out of its hole, is an anonymous saying in Turkish. Nevertheless, I think that it

is more important to have the snake linger on listening to you with full attention due to the essential information, and attention provoking facts presented rather than returning to its hole with a sudden bite. Although considered to be one of the crucial components during formal education, learning how to speak effectively may be the most ignored one (Cramond, 1993; Barnes and Hayes, 1995; Smith, 1997). We live in such an era, that life during higher education almost consists of listening to long lectures or sitting at a computer desk typing reports. Let alone finding the possibility to get floor to speak sophisticatedly about issues in the profession trained, higher education learners adopt a tendency to lose their ability to communicate effectively face to face.

Research reveals that many students graduate from higher education having had no or little instruction in public speaking (MacIntyre et al., 1997; Nofsinger, 1990; Phillips, 1992; Smith, 1997). Smith (1997) quotes that learning to speak effectively and without fear was nearly top of the list when college graduates were asked what they wished they had learned in college. Consequently, it may be argued that college graduates having had little or no education in oral communication skills may develop speaking anxiety and may be regarded as weak representatives of the education they received or their professional development. If one of the guiding principles of a university is to graduate learners holding full competence in a target language, then it is indispensable to provide them with op-

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opportunities to practice their oral presentation skills. Either the students should be provided with opportunities to develop their presentation skills during courses, or offering a course on oral presentation skills may be few of the solutions for students during their formal higher education.

Sandwich Technique

During a visit to a friend in a private school, I was invited to participate in an in-service meeting in which the focus was finding ways to help learners practice speaking skills in a foreign language. The magical technique was introduced as 'sandwich evaluation technique'. At that moment it hit me that I could adopt this technique for multiple purposes, and since then I have used it during my foreign language classes for learners majoring political sciences, and during my projects as a doctorate student. Needless to say, it has helped a lot in practicing speaking skills, decreasing speaking anxiety, peer teaching and peer evaluation.

What is sandwich technique? Very basically this technique is a peer evaluation technique in which learners take turns to present a topic, and after each turn, peers comment on the presentation by focusing on a good aspect, aspects to be improved, and a good aspect again respectively. I do think that it is crucial that practitioners come up with a constructive argument about aspects to be improved since eating a sandwich that holds no content is rather dull and tasteless.

Good Points about Sandwich Technique

Literature on speaking skills reveals much insights about the importance of oral communication skills and the relation between oral communication and speaking anxiety (Sparks and Ganschow, 1996). To kill two birds with one stone, I simply suggest lecturers from various disciplines to use a 'sandwich technique' during sessions that can serve for multiple purposes: practicing speaking skills in L2, constructing knowledge about presentation skills, reducing speaking anxiety, practicing own major through five-minute speeches, receiving feedback from peers about projects to be conducted or being conducted.

In foreign language or undergraduate teacher education classes, I have observed that students who had no or less self-confidence in their L2 speaking skills, looked more self-confident to present a speech in a small group. Also, learners who were reserved to take turns during whole class discussions, were more outspoken when in a small

group. Since learners held the responsibility of their peers' learning about the topic they presented, they sought ways to facilitate their understanding by exemplifying the matters they presented.

Points to be Improved

Although research provides significant evidence on peer evaluation techniques. There are certain aspects that require attention. First, meticulous classroom management is a must. When a class holds more than 20 students, it may be difficult to control the voices of students presenting their topics within groups. Since every classroom is expected to have 4 corners, I suggest to make use of these corners so that the presenters of different groups do not face each other. This technique may reduce distraction of the presenter. Also, it is crucial that all groups keep pace with each other during the production and evaluation phase; therefore, I suggest to allot time for each stage of the activity. For instance, one of the members in the group may be assigned as a time-keeper, or the lecturer may use a distracting sound (e.g., bell, piper) indicating that peers have to change turn.

When the purpose of the 'sandwich technique' was peer teaching, it happened that peers did not listen meticulously to the topic presented, they rather concentrated on practicing their own topic to be presented. During such sessions I suggest that learners take notes of the presentation and reflect on the topic presented. For instance, reflection can take place as asking questions related to unclear issues in the presentation, giving opinion about the topic, or summarizing the presentation.

Conclusion

Briefly, the purpose of this workshop is three-fold. First, to introduce a course on oral presentation skills at higher education and present a course evaluation report that may guide curriculum developers to consider the importance of a course on academic presentation skills in higher education. Second, to provide the audience with a metaphorical peer evaluation technique that may serve for multiple purposes such as reducing speaking anxiety, peer teaching, and practicing newly learned information in multi-disciplinary circumstances. Finally, to provide opportunities for participants with practicing oral presentations within a small group and enable them to construct invaluable tips that may lead to effective oral presentations.

Audience: From all disciplines (preferably lecturers or curriculum planners)

Anticipated number: 20 persons (4 persons per group)

Anticipated time: 75 minutes

Workshop activities

1. Introduction: Getting to know each other. (warm-up)

2. Have audience write on a piece of paper how they feel about speaking in front of many unfamiliar faces. What strengths and weaknesses they think they have when speaking in front of an audience? Jot down their expectations for the present workshop. Discuss in pairs.

3. Introduce the ‘sandwich technique’.

4. Activity 1:

- ⌚ Have groups of 4 persons, preferably not having met before.
- ⌚ Each group is distributed a transparency and markers.
- ⌚ Participants take turns in introducing themselves (out-line provided for guidance). Peers are nominated as the leader, the secretary, or the time-keeper. Peers also change turns in duties assigned.
- ⌚ Every presentation is allotted 2 mins. Peer evaluation is 1 minute for each person in the group.
- ⌚ Evaluations are jotted on the transparencies considering the sandwich metaphor (no personal names used).
- ⌚ A volunteer presents her/himself on the stage.
- ⌚ Feedback is taken from participants regarding the input jotted on the transparencies. This will provide a blue print for step 5.
- ⌚ Feedback regarding the technique.

5. An interactive lecture on how to conduct effective speeches.

- ⌚ Expected outline: Do’s and don’ts before, during, and after presentations with reference to real presentations observed.
- ⌚ Preparation / Delivery / Body language / Use of visuals/Interaction with audience / Language / etc.

6. Activity 2: Persuasive speech

- ⌚ Groups are supplied with objects (frames, boxes, etc.).
- ⌚ Each person in the group has to persuade the others by introducing the product as an efficient tool used in their profession.
- ⌚ On the transparencies group members write the specific aspects (e.g., words or phrases used, tone of voice, body language) that helped them to be persuaded (or not).
- ⌚ Feedback from every group. (aspects that persuade = good; aspects that do not persuade = to be improved)

7. Collecting the transparencies, and comparing the persuasive aspects and the unpersuasive ones. An interactive discussion with audience.

8. Activity 3: Constructing a list (e.g., of language to be used) for persuasive presentations.

9. Activity 4:

- ⌚ Audience return to the piece of paper on which they jotted down their strengths and weaknesses in presentations. They have to consider whether their remarks have been mentioned, and whether the activities provided them with their expectations from the workshop.
- ⌚ Pairs make a sandwich to evaluate the workshop.

10. The presenter receives feedback.

11. Concluding remarks.

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Biography

Hanife Akar is a research assistant at Middle East Technical University, Department of Educational Sciences. Her field of specialization is Curriculum and Instruction. She had formerly 9 years of English foreign language teaching experience at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara University.