Activities and Strategies for Teaching Effective Presentation Skills

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Abstract

The ability to communicate effectively is a crucial life skill and an expected outcome for many university graduates. Delivering a short persuasive presentation, such as a "3-minute pitch", is useful in many career contexts and situations. Powerful communication encompasses the speaker's body language, voice and interactions and can be enhanced by rhetorical devices. Scaffolded learning activities, combined with practice and feedback, can enable students to become more proficient, more persuasive, and more positive speakers.

In this session the presenter will share several activity ideas, strategies and tips based on a curriculum for teaching persuasive presentation skills to engineering undergraduates. These theoretically-grounded activities are based in genre, Kolb's experiential learning and rhetoric theories and informed by neuroscience. Students engage in critical thinking as they analyse and evaluate persuasive speaking techniques while applying them to their own presentations. Practice, feedback and reflection aid students in improving, and in some cases transforming, their speaking.

Many activities can be done easily with minimal set-up and materials. YouTube, other online resources, and online learning platforms can be exploited for optimal benefit. These exercises can inject energy and motivation into the classroom as students witness their improvement and gain more confidence in their speaking.

Keywords: Active learning; classroom techniques; presentations; oral communication; delivery; experiential learning

1.Introduction

Effective communication is an important life skill and a common concern in higher education. Delivering a persuasive presentation is applicable to many career situations including job interviews, meetings, product pitches and proposal presentations. Presentation involves language choice and structure, as well as aspects of delivery such as body language, voice, and visual presentation. The students discussed in the context of this paper are EFL engineering undergraduates studying an ESP course "Professional Communiation in English". They typically have limited life experiences with speaking in English, having studied in examination-oriented secondary schools, while their university English experiences mostly involve listening to lectures and reading. To succeed with effective spoken communication, activities must take students beyond grammar and punctuation and into active exploration and practice. This paper offers ideas for teaching persuasive presentation and communication in an L2 university setting, with activities which can be implemented with minimal set-up time and adopted to other contexts. First, ways of teaching presentation skills based on genre pedagogy are presented, followed by two additional activity ideas.

2. Using the genre-based approach

Genres can be conceived as purposeful, goal-oriented, and staged ways of using language in response to specific cultural contexts [1]. Persuasive presentations aim to influence, so rather than simply providing information, the speaker must attend to engaging the audience's interest. Genre pedagogy offers students explicit and systematic instruction on ways of using language in specific contexts and cultures; it support students' learning and creativity while empowering them with patterns and possibilities for language use [2]. Teaching persuasive presentation with genre pedagogy, therefore, instructs students on how to use spoken language, body language, and visual presentation to engage and influence others.

Feez' [3] teaching-learning cycle offers a scaffolded approach to teaching genres. Five stages can be implemented flexibly, which include developing the context, modeling and deconstructing the text, joint construction of the text, independent construction of the text, and linking related texts [3]. Hyland's [2] suggestions for teaching academic writing with the genre-based approach are adapted to teaching persuasive presentations and detailed below.

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2.1 Developing the context

This stage of learning includes raising students' awareness of the purposes and cultural and social context of the genre [2]. Hyland's [2] relevant suggestions include presenting and discussing the context through videos, and discussing and analyzing cultural contexts and cross-cultural similarities and differences. YouTube and other online videos of authentic presentations can be curated and used for these purposes. Suggested videos include "3-minute thesis" videos, product idea pitches from TV shows such as "Dragon's Den", and Steve Jobs' Apple product launch videos. Discussions can include the body language aspects of delivery as well as features of language.

2.2 Modeling and deconstructing the text

This phase of the cycle involves teachers and students exploring the stages of a genre and its language features [2]. The common steps of a presentation introduction (e.g. providing an overview) and conclusion (e.g. thanking the audience) can be elicited and written on the board, and students can watch online presentations to see if and how these steps are used. Listening and writing activities can teach presentation language features include signposting, transitions, and typical phrases. Moreover, features of delivery such as eye contact, gestures, posture and intonation can be modelled and taught.

2.3 Joint negotiation

Teachers and learners work together to construct the target genre in this stage. Scaffolded tasks and guidance are offered while the teacher shifts to the role of facilitator and responder [2]. Activities from Hyland [2] which can be adapted to the persuasive presentation context include small-group construction of presentations to the whole class and creating a text following a given model. Presentation planning templates showing the steps and stages of a presentation can be developed and used for classroom practice activities.

2.4 Independent construction

Students apply their learning and construct the genre text with the teacher offering feedback in this stage [2]. Activities can include brainstorming, outlining, revising a text based on other's comments, as well as researching and constructing a text for a specific audience and purpose [2]. In this course, short presentations are typically given in each class. The skill focus of the presentation can vary depending on the topics which have been learned, for example, aspects of body language, voice intonation and stress, transitions, attention-getters, sign-posting, etc.

3.Class activities for persuasive presentations
3.1 Activity for awareness of audience and purpose

Awareness of audience and purpose are key elements of genre pedagogy. Likewise, the classical rhetoricians deemed an awareness of audience a primary consideration for shaping discourse [4]. Cicero stressed the need for the speaker to adjust to the situation, purpose, subject, audience and the speaker's individual traits such as skill, reputation and personality [4]. These areas of focus from rhetoric theory can be taught as purpose, message, audience and voice [5]. This activity explained in Table 1 offers students the direct experience of adapting their presentation to suit their audience.

Table 1: Activity for building audience awareness

1.	Students pair with a partner. (Ensure an even number of pairs).
2.	Tell students that all pairs will do a brief presentation on "the benefits of smartphones".
3.	Assign the pairs different audiences for their presentation: - A) customers in a phone service store - B) primary school students - C) engineers at Apple
4.	Instruct students to prepare their presentation. Pairs should discuss and decide their purpose, situation, and the style (voice) they want to project.
5.	Student pairs should now be assigned to give their presentations to another pair with a different intended audience. For example, an "A" group can work with a "B" or "C" group.
6.	Students deliver a 3-minute presentation to the other group, first informing their audience who they will portray in the activity. Role play and interaction can be encouraged.
7.	The groups swap roles so that all students experience both presenting and listening to

	another presentation.
8.	Students then reflect on their process and experience with questions such as "What was your purpose?", "What kind of content / language did you choose and why?", "What kind of style did you adopt?" Students can also consider differences between the presentation they gave and the one they listened to, namely, the same topic with a different audience.

As an effective context-building activity [2], this roleplay allows students to experience changing their content, language, and delivery based on their audience in an engaging and sometimes humorous situation. Students have been known to take on the role of smartphone store staff clamoring for their "audience" to sign two-year phone service contracts. Discussion can then relate this phenomenon to other situations, e.g. the differences between an academic group presentation given to a teacher for assessment purposes and a persuasive presentation given to pitch a proposal.

3.2 Delivery role play activity

Effective and engaging presentation delivery includes posture, movement, gestures and voice to establish an appropriate rapport and make the audience feel comfortable. By treating these facets of delivery as skills to be learned and practiced when appropriate, students can be empowered to adopt new ways of speaking which lends itself to persuasive communication. Students can be encouraged to be critical observers and analysts [6] of the genre of persuasive presentations. Cultural differences regarding appropriate body language and eye contact, as well as the importance of context and situation, can be explored and discussed.

This activity includes showing a short YouTube video [7] in which a woman first presents with ineffective delivery methods (e.g. monotone voice, lack of eye contact and gestures), and is then coached by a mentor to have more energy, better posture, and the like. The woman gives the presentation again, transforming her body language and voice into that of a charismatic professional, and delivering a strong and impactful presentation. This kind of video could be recreated if not available on YouTube. Full details of this activity are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Delivery role play activity

1.	Show the presenter/coach video to students.
2.	Elicit ideas from the students in response to "How did the woman change her presentation?", and write the ideas on the board.
3.	Introduce an easy presentation topic (e.g. "the best place to eat on campus") and give students a minute to prepare.
4.	Put students into pairs (students A and B) and explain the rest of the activity.
5.	Student A delivers their presentation "less effectively".
6.	Student B coaches Student A on how to improve.
7.	Student A transforms and delivers their presentation "more effectively".
8.	Student B gives feedback on the "more effective" presentation and changes made.
9.	Students swap roles so that now Student B delivers "less effectively", etc.

This activity allows shy students to experiment and step outside of their comfort zone in the realm of role play; many enjoy mimicking the woman from the video. Activities based on Kolb's theory of experiential learning [8] can be implemented. After the concrete experience of effective delivery, students can be instructed to reflect on their experience, conceptualising theories of effective presentation. These theories can be tested with active experimentation during practice presentations in future classes.

4. Conclusion

These theoretically-grounded presentation skill activities can enliven the classroom and potentially provide students with transformative experiences. Weekly practice and learning by doing with feedback from peers and teacher are tips for success. Furthermore, students can be encouraged to take videos of their presentations throughout the semester and share them on institutional learning platforms or social media; these videos can provide lasting and meaningful evidence of visible changes in students' delivery and presentation effectiveness.

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