# Unified Efforts across Language Departments to Teach Efficient Oral Discourse

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## Abstract

*This paper presents some results of a Teaching Innovation Project based at the University of Navarra. In this project, teachers of both the Language Institute and the School of Management Assistants (ISSA) have come together to share ideas and strategies geared at fostering communication skills on the part of the students, who will likely conduct their professional work in the business world. The starting point was a need, identified across departments (Spanish and English Business Communication, Second Foreign Languages – French or German), for these undergraduate students to be able to handle appropriately formal registers when communicating in public. Teachers within their own particular area had previously undertaken efforts to that effect, however failing to offer a shared set of objectives that might facilitate teaching and learning experiences as perceived with both common activities and common goals. Led by an expert in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), a native speaker of English who has been working in Higher Education for over 35 years, this project brings together a team of six members (two German teachers, two English teachers, one French teacher and one Spanish teacher). A formal, unified, multi-pronged approach identified several lacunae and digital platforms allowed for the productive exchange of ideas among teachers and students. Channelling, thus, communicative activities with key strategic methods and reusable content enabled the faculty to assess students' needs in a more comprehensive manner. An online bank of material on speaking skills has been set up and is functionally operative, shedding light on activities that have been successful (or not) in the classroom to date. This ongoing project will continue into a second academic year, focusing instead on the quality of the students' written discourse.*

## 1. Introduction

The project this paper discusses was set into motion last year, over the course of several meetings where language teachers confirmed the need to work together towards some common goals. A basic, driving objective emerged to identify key areas of speaking discourse that needed reinforcement in our classrooms. Students of the degree in Management Assistance at the University of Navarra are meant to work flexibly and at an intermediate to advanced or even proficient level in at least two languages. This implies a heavy focus on languages, with subjects of 9ECTS every academic year in English as well as in another foreign language, be that French or German. To enter university, students are required to pass an exam certifying an average B2 level in English under the Common European Framework of Reference. As for the other languages, they may have never had contact with them before. This means a slightly different pedagogical approach, with a general imbalance in the kind of activities utilized inside and outside the classroom. Students of this degree are usually quite keen on languages, as the careers they envision are in fields such as business, management, and intercultural relations, among others. Most undergraduates are therefore passionate about other languages and cultures, even if their level does not match those passions. So far, English teachers have particularly noticed that, over the last few years, students have strong oral skills, though heavily inflected with informal and colloquial undertones, which are detrimental to a career in the business world.

In May 2017 this project was presented by the University's Language Institute to the board of the Innovation in Education Team at the University of Navarra for approval. Consisting of a six-member team from both the Language Institute and the School of Management Assistants's own language department, it was headed by a Language Institute's English teacher experienced in academic skills in higher education. The group decided that the first stage of this project, broadly taken, would be to foster oral communication skills among our students and from a multi-pronged approach from an integrative angle. The project leader decided to create a Google Drive folder where we could all share activities that had worked well in class. In order to assess the aims of those activities, there would be monthly meetings, and an assessment sheet was uploaded for all of us to use in order to reflect on each of the activities used. No matter the language or the level involved, we would thus be able to identify successful activities that might not only help students improve their communicative skills, but

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also us in our teaching, enabling the sharing of experiences and outcomes when filed in the speaking activities bank.

We should perhaps state here the theoretical basis of our work. Far from trying to come up with a new method, our goal is to have a pool of teaching materials available to all language teachers. No radically new methods need to be brought into play: "We now know that other curricular elements such as the syllabus, the teaching materials, the teachers and the assessment procedures play an equally, if not more, important role in the success of a language programme" [1]. In what follows we provide an overview of the sort of activities that have been used so far by our team.

## 2. Oral Communication Activities

From a didactic point of view, the focus is on uncovering materials that integrate not just the ability to communicate a message in a given language – English, French, German or Spanish – but to immerse students in "problem posing, investigating, critical analysis, taking multiple perspectives, and communicating to build and share knowledge" [2]. We draw, to some extent, on previous work by Jaidev and Blackstone, namely on their "inquiry-based pedagogical approach": "Such an approach was employed to facilitate students' acquisition of English language and communication skills within the multi-modal contexts needed for the workplace by engaging them in a group or team research project that required them to actively apply all of the communication skills that they were being exposed to in a particular professional communication module. In this way, the approach simulated real-world, workplace communication demands within a classroom context" [3].

The overriding principle behind such an approach is getting the students to realize, little by little, the different registers to be assumed when dealing with context and audience, thus being able to switch from informal to formal situations with ease. Accuracy is not so much at stake as is the prevalent need for them not to mix informal – or slang, at times – overtures into their business exchanges. In the words of Wee, speakers need to make "careful adjustments that take into account anticipated audience feedback" [4]. In other words, the principle of reciprocity in communication must be maintained, as, among other things, "it involves varying the degree of formality according to the individual we are speaking to" [5] and it requires the participants in the conversation to "produce and tailor language smoothly and readily" [6].

Adequate responses to unpredictability in formal and informal settings is of utmost importance to future management experts, as well as their ability to perform under pressure, time constraints, tight agendas, etc. while effectively managing turn-taking. Project work in a second or third language in the degree in Management Assistance requires decision-making and problem-solving that should be fomented in classroom activities. Students also need to receive adequate practice in improvised paraphrasing, summarizing, and presenting situations in the appropriate register.

Taking Jaidev and Blackstone's work as inspiration, we have compiled activities that foster students' collaboration, teamwork, critical thinking, etc. while leaving room for future assignments, e.g. writing tasks.

### 2.1 Testing the Aims and Results in the Classroom

In order to analyze what we mean by "speaking" activities, we should refer to Goh, who provides thoughtful insight on what "a good speaker" might be [7]. For Goh, this varies depending on the paradigm we use to assess, or even on the uses for which the second language may be intended. Thus, she goes on to highlight some "research highlights that offer pedagogical procedures that can potentially enhance L2 learners' speaking performance" [8]. Goh concludes by asserting: "To teach speaking is to facilitate our students' understanding of speaking processes and scaffold their development of speaking competence in a systematic and theoretically-principled manner" [9]. Scaffolding techniques are, then, basic patterns that should slowly but surely become consistently formed into students' minds so that their structures start sounding more like those of native speakers and less like a translation from their native language into the target language.

The legacy of EFL and ESP experience has served to influence in much of the scaffolding activities used transversally in all of the languages involved. It is easy to see how activities like the ones featured in our project from Pearson's *Skillful* series [10], on hedging or on softening criticism, can be exploited at lower or higher levels. Much the same could be said of other materials [11]. The student is provided with comfortable language in the appropriate register and learns how to reformulate using self-correction.

**2.2 Teachers' and Students' Feedback**

The questionnaire teachers fill in at the end of each task serves two main purposes: on the one hand, the teacher may contrast what the intended aim was and whether it has been fulfilled or not; on the other hand, it may be of interest to other teachers in the department who, though teaching a different language, may be able to adapt that activity to use in their own lessons. Despite students' not being recorded nor being asked to fill in questionnaires, their feedback is taken into account, since teachers assess to what extent the activity was successful not only in getting students to speak, but also in creating a natural, stress-free setting.

An important aspect of the questionnaire is that it uses both quantitative and qualitative data. The teacher assigns an overall mark to the task (1-5), based on degree of satisfaction. Together with the name of the activity, they note competencies, aims, when and how it took place, positive and negative aspects worthy of attention, and possible improvements.

## 3. Conclusion

Some shared conclusions across the different languages and levels involved are the teachers' remarks on the questionnaires regarding the preparation required before the actual oral task is carried out. This usually occurs in a previous lesson or right before the oral production takes place, but it is evident that the more the students are familiar with the vocabulary and structures (grammatical and otherwise) they are supposed to use, the more efficient they are in their productive exchanges.

Another shared conclusion is the need to establish criteria with other skills needed in this degree. Seeing that the project has thus far shed light on some interesting materials for teachers at all levels and languages, its future use is warranted. The very nature of a bank of user-friendly speaking activities stressing the skills Management Assistants will need has already set up a scenario for our immediate future. The next step in our ongoing project is the unification of criteria in written discourse, with a continued focus on the ability to distinguish registers they so often mix.

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