

TEACHING IMPROMPTU SPEAKING: A SHORT TALK BEFORE A PRESENTATION

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INTRODUCTION

A presentation is a popular kind of speaking activity in which learners prepare a talk and speak on either a given topic or on the topic of their own choice. Making a presentation in English can be a difficult and demanding or even daunting task. The presenter needs certain skills which go beyond the range of ordinary language classrooms.

Therefore, learners need some systematic training in preparing and performing its different elements – from planning and introducing a topic to concluding and handling questions. To learn how to make clear and well-organized presentations in front of an audience, even if the audience are own classmates, and to overcome a fear of speaking in public takes a lot of practice.

This contribution promotes classroom activities that give students practice in speaking briefly off the cuff. It is the first step to teaching how to make presentations, and it advocates the personalized approach in the lead-in stages of teaching short talks. ‘A short talk’ means a non-stop speaking for 2 or 3 minutes. The talking time may be extended to 5 minutes in the successive stages. In the follow-up activities, practice involves brief talks on nominal available data, thus stimulating students’ creative speech.

PERSONALIZED TALK

The aim of this activity is to introduce the concept of a short talk and give speaking practice not controlled for accuracy.

Start by pre-teaching (if unknown) the words LAYOUT and KEYWORDS, and introduce these concepts.

Negotiate with learners a list of topics for a short talk, e.g. My Hobby, My Best / Worst Holidays,

My Favorite Kind of Music, Terrible Experience I Have Had with a Food (Drink), Annoying Behavior in Public Places, etc. Each teacher knows which topics are taboo with their learners –

so avoid including them.

Remember that learners need to be motivated in order to be successful. Personal involvement, which makes language learning content personally meaningful, is a very effective way of enhancing motivation (Griffiths, G. and Keohane, 2001).

Give learners a demonstration of a short talk on one of the topics in the list. Therefore, highlight the keywords and layout of your short talk on the board. Make sure you do not exceed the time limit.

Encourage students to ask you questions concerning your talk and answer them honestly.

Ask students to choose a subject from the suggested list and to prepare carefully what they are going to say. It may help, if you encourage them to work in pairs – rehearsing the talk beforehand takes some of the pressure off the students.

Ask the students not to write their talk in full – just to make notes if necessary – because they will have to speak not read to their partners.

Set the time limit for a talk – 2 or 3 minutes. Allow volunteers to give short talks – do not press all the students, particularly those who do not feel like talking on the first occasion.

After the activity ask the learners to self- and peer- assess their speaking. Do not interrupt the students – let them share their opinions freely.

As a final touch, comment on the effectiveness of the students' brief talks, but make sure you do not express unjust or harsh criticism – learners will need a lot of practicing to perfect the skill of getting the meaning across.

COLLECTING RESPONSES TO A QUESTIONNAIRE AND REPORTING FINDINGS

A possible successive activity is to teach students to write questionnaires / surveys, gather information and make a concise report on the obtained data. This makes a good introduction into prospective talks on professional topics. You can write a short model questionnaire yourself on a topic your students are interested in.

Here the aim is fluency rather than accuracy, i.e. to give practice in non-stop brief talk.

You can start by giving learners an example of a written multiple-choice questionnaire (see Appendix 1 '*Attitude to Money*') and ask to collect answers within their groups. In large classes, I put students into two groups.

First, give your students practice in gathering information for a sample survey. Divide the class into two groups and ask each student to answer questions. Then ask members of both groups to exchange their answers, to summarize the data collected and to give their group's concise report on the findings. Obviously, each group will either have to choose a presenter or each student will contribute in turns.

Processing and summarizing the collected information is time-consuming and depends on the number of students. In a class of 20 students, i.e. 2 groups of 10, it might take up to 30 minutes. Time is not wasted if learners use English in processing the information. So it is worthwhile to give learners an opportunity to share and discuss the findings and prepare short talks.

The length of the short talk should not exceed 5 minutes, so remind students about the time limit before starting the speaking part of this activity.

It is highly unlikely that learners will give an adequate talk at this stage, unless you pre-teach the appropriate vocabulary. Basically, the problem they will face is the choice of relevant vocabulary for describing statistical findings.

In your feedback you may have to introduce the appropriate vocabulary for presenting statistics, i.e. 'responses', 'respondents', 'percentage', 'majority', 'minority', 'preference', 'priority' or you may even have to remind the learners how to calculate the percentage.

Here is a possible version of a talk on 'Attitudes to Money' survey.

There have been 10 respondents to the 'Attitudes to Money' survey. The findings are:

None of them carry a lot of money, but all the respondents have some money on them.

The best purchases are computers – 40%, second-hand cars – 40%, books – 20%.

80% of respondents do not buy lottery tickets, while 20% hope to win enough money for traveling.

Half of the respondents never borrow or lend money, the rest of them agree that earning is harder than spending.

The attitudes to the best ways of earning money differ: 30% believe in getting a well-paid job, 20% - in marrying a well-off person, and 50% - in becoming a VIP.

Interestingly, none of the respondents suggested their own ideas in the space provided for the purpose.

It may be concluded that... .

In order to give learners practice in writing questionnaires you are advised to negotiate a topic that the majority are interested in and do the brainstorming of ideas for questionnaire items.

An example of brainstorming ideas on the subject 'TO HAVE OR NOT TO HAVE A CAR' (arguments 'FOR' & 'AGAINST' the car) is presented in Appendix 2.

Ask learners to write a questionnaire using all or some of the generated ideas. Make sure the number of questions does not exceed 5 or 6. Ask learners to gather information outside the class and prepare a short talk as home assignment.

Make sure learners speak and do not read what they want to say.

REPORTING STATISTICS

The aim of this follow-up activity is language accuracy rather than fluency.

If you have access to computers in your English classrooms, you can give individual computer tasks to pairs of students. Give each pair a set of different statistics and ask to draw bar or pie charts using Microsoft Excel software. If there are no computers at your disposal, learners can draw diagrams on transparencies or paper and practice giving short talks to peers, using them.

After learners have finished drawing the diagrams, invite them to rehearse describing the data in pairs. Then let each pair give a short talk to another pair. Encourage students to self- and peer-assess their performance placing emphasis on accuracy in speaking.

In this activity, the teacher's role is minimal – to monitor the students' progress and provide assistance if needed. Monitoring the learners' language is useful for the follow-up feedback.

An example of a pie chart is given in Appendix 3, and its short description is as follows:

The most common crimes that have been committed this week are thefts from cars – 43% of all the reported crimes. The second most common crimes have been assaults resulting in bodily harm – 22%, which are followed by muggings – 13%. Car thefts and frauds make up the smallest proportion of recently committed crimes – 11%.

It is noteworthy that the statistical data was taken from the local newspaper, which makes the talk meaningful – students describe the actual situation in their own country.

A wealth of materials for short talks – about the environment, pollution, population, migration, national economy, energy, governments, labor, tourism, transport, health, education, society, etc., can be found on the Internet websites. Efficient search engines, such as <http://www.google.com> for example, are very useful. As soon as students know where to look for information they become ingenious at finding unusual data and enjoy making contributions.

FINAL REMARKS

Success in language learning depends on what goes on inside and between people in the classroom (Stevick, 1980:4). Classroom education, to a very large degree, is talk, i.e. it is the social use of language. For learners, social risk-taking is integrated with linguistic risk-taking. Giving a short talk is perceived by learners as a slight and hence justifiable risk to take on.

Preparation for a short talk involves little, or no, preliminary reading, which means that students do not have any materials to narrate. Learners are expected to report, or to enunciate their own ideas in their own words. Creative tasks stimulate social and linguistic risk-taking, i.e. experimenting with language, using it to express own ideas. In this way, giving short talks serves the purpose of acquiring a skill for life long learning.

Finally, having built up self-confidence in speaking briefly in front of their classmates, learners are ready for mastering extended presentations. However, they will apparently need more extensive training for developing masterly presentation skills.

References

Griffiths, G. and Keohane, K. *Personalizing Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press. 2001.

Stevick, E. *Teaching Language: A Way and Ways*. Rowdy. Mass: Newbury House. 1980.

Appendix 1

An sample questionnaire ‘Attitude to Money’.

1 HOW MUCH MONEY DO YOU HAVE IN YOUR WALLET OR POCKET?

A none B about C a lot

2 WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BEST / WORST PURCHASE?

A my best purchaseB my worst purchase

3 WHAT WOULD YOU DO, IF YOU WON A JACKPOT IN THE LOTTERY?

A travel around the world B buy a house C buy a luxury car

D other (please specify)

4 WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON YOU HAVE LEARNT ABOUT MONEY?

A money does not grow on trees B money is easier spent than earned

C never borrow or lend money D other (please specify)

5 WHAT IS THE BEST WAY OF EARNING MONEY?

A get a well-paid job B marry a rich person C become a VIP (Very Important Person)

D other (please specify)

Appendix 2

Brainstorming ideas for writing a questionnaire ‘To Have or Not to Have a Car’

Problems:

- *POLLUTION*
- *CONGESTION*
- *HEALTH CARE*
- *CAR MAINTENANCE*
- *HAZARDS*
- *GLOBAL WARMING*
- *ROAD ACCIDENTS*
- *ROAD RAGE*

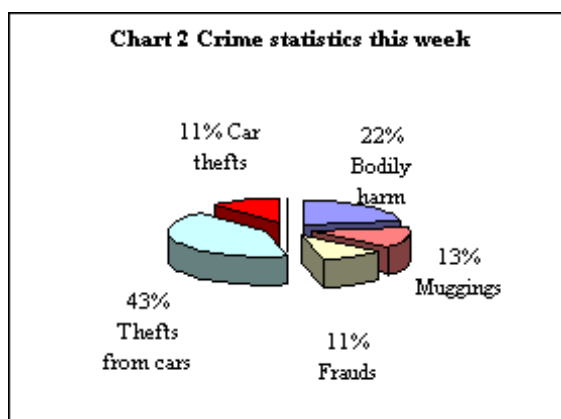
- *PUBLIC TRANSPORT*
- *ROAD-BUILDING*
- *THEFTS OF CARS & FROM CARS*

Possible measures

- *BAN PRIVATE CARS FROM THE CITY CENTER*
- *INTRODUCE TOLLS ON MAJOR ROADS (enter the city center)*
- *INTRODUCE TRAFFIC-CALMING MEASURES (speed bumps & speed restrictions)*
- *PAY A YEARLY BONUS TO NON-CAR OWNERS*
- *INTRODUCE A PARK-AND-RIDE SCHEME (motorists park on the outskirts of the city and take buses in)*
- *INCREASE PARKING CHARGES*
- *PROVIDE MORE CAR PARKS (e.g. underground parking spaces)*
- *BUILD MORE CYCLE LANES*
- *INCREASE PUBLIC TRANSPORT PROVISION*
- *CUT THE COST OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT*

Appendix 3

A pie chart example for reporting Crime Statistics



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