

# Developing Presentation Skills by Using Authentic Literature

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## Abstract

Because authentic literature engages students' interest, it provides an ideal source for the content of discussions and extemporaneous presentations. For the four activities described in this article, intermediate-level ESL students choose their own readings and come to class prepared to present them. Small group work based on the readings not only promotes listening and speaking skills, but also prepares students for more formal presentations to the whole class.

## Introduction

Everyone likes a good story. Children, adults, and even students can hardly resist the lure of a well-told tale, whether that tale is presented in a movie, a book, or read aloud. On the basis of this observation, I began to use children's literature and other authentic literature in an intermediate ESL listening and speaking course that I teach at a community college. It may seem unusual to use authentic literature to develop oral language skills, but I have found that it provides a platform which allows students to engage in authentic communication and to practice extemporaneous presentation skills. According to Cambourne (1988, p. 29), reading, writing, listening, and speaking are tools used "the mind's effort to create meaning;" the different language skills interact synergistically to increase understanding through depth of processing. Although the connection between reading and oral skills may be not be intuitively obvious, Day and Bamford (1998) review several studies of extensive reading programs; these studies indicate that students who read extensively not only improve their reading proficiency and writing skills, but also their vocabulary, and even their listening and speaking skills.

This article describes four exercises that use authentic literature as the basis for extemporaneous presentations. Students select their own readings and write short book reports about them; in my course, the book reports are due every other week, and students bring both their report and their book or article to class on the due date. Book report days are often the liveliest days of class, with students engaged and on-task as they share their readings with each other.

For their reading material, students select either children's books or *Reader's Digest* articles. The purpose of limiting the intermediate-level students' selection to these materials is to encourage fluent reading. Day and Bamford (1998) point out that sight vocabulary and general vocabulary knowledge can be developed only when the reading material is at an *i minus 1* level. Their term derives from Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis that comprehensible input involves elements just beyond students' current level of language acquisition, or *i + 1*. In contrast to *i + 1*, material at an *i minus 1* level includes vocabulary and grammar that is well within the reader's competence in order for language learners to read fluently and strengthen their general vocabulary.

## Book Reports

The written book reports are separated into two parts: vocabulary and summary. For the vocabulary section, students choose four unfamiliar words from their reading. For each word, they first copy the original sentence and determine its part of speech in that context. Next, they look up and copy the appropriate definition from the dictionary, and then they create a new sentence of their own using the word. As Nation (2001) notes, knowing a word involves much more than simply memorizing its meaning; the vocabulary section of the book report pushes students to go beyond learning the meaning of a word to learning its form and use as well. In the second section of the book report, students write a brief summary using their own words. They must incorporate the four new vocabulary words from the vocabulary section in their summary, which gives students another opportunity to practice using the words. Because students write numerous book reports throughout the semester, the iterative nature of the writing allows the

teacher to guide students to write clear and concise summaries. In addition, writing a summary of the book or article serves as a form of rehearsal for the oral in-class exercises; even shy and low-level students are able to speak because they have prepared their ideas in writing beforehand.

## Oral Communication Activities

The next section of this paper gives a brief description of four activities that are based on the book reports and explains the skills that each activity develops. These exercises improve the verbal and nonverbal skills necessary for effective extemporaneous presentations, while also promoting critical listening and vocabulary development. They involve authentic communication, so students hold each other accountable for clear, comprehensible summaries and presentations. Thus, the classmates' immediate feedback on one another's oral communication complements the teacher's individualized feedback on the written book reports. Because it can be intimidating for intermediate-level students to speak in front of a large group of people, the first three exercises involve small-group presentations that prepare students for the fourth exercise in which students present to the entire class.

### Impromptu Small-Group Presentations

- A. On a piece of paper, students copy their list of words and definitions, without the sentences, from the vocabulary section of their book reports. They also silently read their book report summary.
- B. The teacher divides the class into groups of five to six students and hands out an instruction sheet with jobs for each group member. The instruction sheet contains the following information, which the teacher goes over with the class before the groups begin working:

#### Speaker's jobs:

1. Give the "vocabulary police" (explained below) a list of your words.
2. Present your story in two minutes.
3. Answer questions.

#### Listeners' Jobs:

1. **Vocabulary Police:** Listen for the vocabulary words in the speaker's presentation; check off all words that the speaker uses and tell the group which vocabulary words were used after the speaker finishes.
2. **Note Taker:** Take notes on the story as the person speaks; read your notes to the group when the speaker is done.
3. **Questioner(s):** Think of at least one question to ask the speaker about the story or article; ask it after the note taker has read his or her notes.
4. **Timer:** Each speaker has five minutes total to present the story and answer questions about it—time the presentation and stop the speaker when two minutes have passed; time the response period and stop it after three minutes.

- C. The class discusses which of the listener jobs the students found most difficult and why. Disagreements are debated, and connections are made to the types of listening that must be done in college.

This activity gives students experience presenting to a small group, promoting confidence for larger group presentations. It also requires students to listen actively, with a different focus depending on which listener job they have. These different listening experiences move students beyond the immediate context of the speaking and listening class by encouraging students to think metacognitively about the listening skills needed for success in other college classes.

### Twenty Questions

- A. Students work in small groups of three to four students. One student shows group members the cover or title of his or her reading or one picture from the reading.
- B. The group members ask yes or no questions about the book or article based on the picture or title. The student answering

questions may only say yes or no; additional information or explanations may not be shared.

C. After four to five minutes, the teacher says, "Stop," and the group members have two minutes to write a summary of the reading to the best of their ability. The student with the reading also writes a summary.

D. Students go around their groups, sharing their summaries; they may expand on what they wrote. The last person to share is the student who read the book or article. After this, other students may ask questions if necessary.

E. The process is repeated until each student in the group has an opportunity to show a picture or title.

F. A class discussion at the end of the activity explores how students felt about asking and answering yes or no questions and how much information they were able to learn about the readings by asking these questions.

The challenge of this activity is for students to think of good yes or no questions that enable them to get a sense of the plot or outline. Thinking of good questions can be very difficult, so the teacher needs to circulate among the groups and model questions by participating as a questioner. Although the activity feels like a game to students, it promotes critical thinking and careful use of language in questioning as well as speaking on their feet. The written summaries give lower level students some space to think so that even if they struggle to articulate questions, they are able to contribute to the group discussion afterwards by sharing their summaries.

## Telephone

A. Students take a few minutes to review their book report and to prepare an oral summary of their book or article. They will have two minutes to give the summary.

B. The class moves the desks so that there are two rows of desks facing each other. If rearranging the desks is not feasible, the students may stand in two rows, facing each other.

C. Students in Row A tell the person across from them in Row B their summary. Students in Row B may ask questions if there is time.

D. When two minutes are over, the teacher says, "Stop," and the students in Row B move to the right one desk. Now, the students in Row B tell their new Row A partner the summary they just heard.

E. After one or one and a half minutes, the teacher says, "Stop." The time period is shorter because less time is needed for retelling the summaries. Again the students in Row B move to the right. This time, however, Row A students tell their new Row B partner the summary they just heard.

F. The process of moving and telling the new summary may be repeated three to five times.

G. After the last round, the students who just finished listening to their partner's summary report to the class the summary they just heard. After each telephone summary is reported, the original student who read the book or article stands and explains what the reading was really about. To save time with a large class, only a few students may report their summaries.

H. Repeat the entire process, starting with students in Row B the second time.

Because students know they will need to explain the summary to a new partner, they are eager to understand what their partner tells them, and some students take quick notes on what their partner says. As the summary gets farther from the source, it inevitably deteriorates, and new partners ask questions and express surprise at the strangeness of the tale, provoking animated discussions as well as laughter.

The low-stakes speaking and listening that students do with their partners prepares them for presenting to the class the last summary they heard from their partner, as well as their original summary. By the time students share the summaries with the class, their affective filters are low and their interest in hearing the true account of the readings is high. If all students report the last summary they heard, then all students must speak twice to the entire class—once to share a summary they heard through the telephone, and once to share the correct version of their own summary. When students share their original summary, they have become experts who are able to correct garbled or missing information, and their confidence and fluency are noticeable.

## Impromptu Large-group Presentations

A. Students have about five minutes to individually rehearse a two to three minute presentation of their reading.

B. Each student goes to the front of the room for the presentation. Students may not read their written summary, but they may refer to it or to other notes if they choose. If necessary, the teacher may keep track of the time and hold up a "STOP" sign when three minutes are over.

C. If there is enough class time, a question and answer period may follow each presentation.

Evaluation of the presentations may be a formal grade or simply class participation credit. Either way, students are in front of the class by themselves; their familiarity with the material they are presenting allows them to concentrate on having good presentation skills, such as eye contact, oral fluency, and posture.

## Conclusion

As seen in the brief descriptions of these four class activities, authentic literature can provide a rich source for cultivating oral language skills. These activities use authentic literature to promote critical thinking, listening skills, and confidence in giving presentations. The first activities build competence and confidence in asking questions and making presentations, thus preparing students for presentations to the entire class. Ultimately, these skills serve the students well in other college classes and their life beyond school.

## References

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