

# Guiding ESL Students Towards Independent Speech Making

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Presentations are a means of bringing the students' reality into the classroom. A step by step approach is proposed to guide students towards independent speech making.

## Introduction

*Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality. I have been for many years a teacher of languages. It is an occupation which at length becomes fatal to whatever share of imagination, observation, and insight an ordinary person may be heir to. To a teacher of languages there comes a time when the world is but a place of many words and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot. (The narrator in Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes 1911: 11)*

When students stand at the front of the class, words are no longer the "foes of reality". When we say that students are not used to active participation in language classes, what is usually meant is that students do not often self-select in communication with a teacher who is standing in front of the whole class, or volunteer to answer questions unless they are directly nominated. In addition, they may seem reluctant to respond spontaneously when nominated and often pause or hesitate before responding. Our experience of language teaching in many countries and of teaching mixed-nationality classes, sometimes makes us aware that students of some nationalities, such as Japanese students, are often more reluctant to respond spontaneously and to express opinions than students of other nationalities. Active classroom participation in language learning classes by the French and British students from our own cultural background is not always the norm either.

In the light of the above, asking apparently reluctant students to stand at the front of the class to give a talk might seem to be a face-threatening activity with little chance of success. This view is supported by writers who refer to affective barriers in the classroom and suggest remedies related to notions such as "shyness". (See for example Doyon, (2000: 37) who refers to speech making as being very high "on a scale of anxiety producing transactions". The question here is perhaps not one of differing perceptions of motivation. It is more a question as to whether we should avoid activities which are perceived as "anxiety-producing". Should we not rather concentrate on finding ways of helping students to overcome their difficulties, especially if the activity in question develops a very useful professional skill, the ability to make a public presentation? A student who produces a successful speech in front of a large class has made a huge step forward in self-confidence.

One reason why students often surprise us in their speech-making ability might be partly because they are not being asked to speak spontaneously. They have time to do detailed preparation. We have come to appreciate the fact that our initially 'reluctant' students, given time to prepare, seem to pay far more attention to detail than students who at first sight appear more ready to communicate and demonstrate abilities which are not revealed in other classroom activities. It would be a shame not to exploit this ability. Secondly, when the person at the front of the class is a student, it is surprising to notice how willingly fellow students self-select to ask questions at the end of a student's presentation. Nevertheless, simply asking students to give a talk is often unlikely to produce anything except embarrassed mumbling at the front of the class. Careful preparation during the first weeks of the course is needed to encourage students to really commit themselves to expressing their own reality in a presentation. The following activities and handouts were designed to help students prepare in some detail for oral presentations.

## Curriculum Goals, Course Aims and Syllabus Objectives

This activity can be part of a teacher's repertoire responding to general English course aims such as "to improve the ability to speak and understand English as a language of real communication; to activate language acquired formally in school education, to improve intelligibility when speaking, to develop confidence in speaking out in English, expressing opinions, attitudes and

feelings". It can also relate to the broad goals of increasingly international courses by asking students to adopt a foreign identity in the preparation exercises and possibly to present some aspect of their own culture in their class presentation. Specific objectives within this general aim can include developing the ability to write concise notes on cue cards for spoken presentations, and the ability to transform notes into sentences while speaking to a group. The ability to formulate questions and follow-up questions can also be practised during this activity.

## Preparation

The first activity requires students to change their identity and present themselves as someone else. This helps to reduce affective barriers which might occur when speaking about oneself.

### Step 1

The teacher distributes a sheet like the one below which introduces a fictional character.

Imagine that you are the person in below. Introduce yourself to the class. Make sentences from the notes.

- **Name** Mary Peters
- **Age** 35
- **Job** Teacher in a Primary School - tiring job.
- **Accommodation** Large house in Manchester, 10 minutes from school
- **Family** Married - 2 young children
- **Hobbies** Tennis when I have time

### Step 2

The teacher demonstrates the introduction, drawing particular attention to the transformation of notes into sentences which form a coherent presentation.

### Step 3

Students are asked to find out more by asking direct and indirect questions. For example:

- Where were you born? or Could you tell me where you were born?
- Why don't you give up your job?

### Step 4

Students are given a similar sheet to prepare in class. (A few examples are given below for both male and female students.) Several students are then selected to present their new self to the class. To further reduce affective barriers students can also be asked to perform their speeches in groups first. The group then selects one representative to speak in front of the whole class. The student is now encouraged by his group and is not alone in front of the class.

### Step 5

Students ask questions trying to find out more - a stage which requires the presenter to think on his or her feet. Janet might be asked why she got divorced, for example.

- **Name** Peter Lingley
- **Age** 32
- **Job** Computer engineer in Central London - very well-paid
- **Accommodation** Large house in the suburbs an hour from central London by underground
- **Family** Married with 3 young children Wife works full-time

- **Hobbies** Hiking parachuting
- **Name** Paul McBride
- **Age** 28
- **Job** Self-employed gardener, not very well paid
- **Accommodation** Small house with large garden in the countryside
- **Family** Single. Live with my girlfriend (She has a well-paid job in London)
- **Hobbies** Repairing old cars
- **Name** Janet Moore
- **Age** 25
- **Job** Accountant for a big company
- **Accommodation** Small flat near my office
- **Family** Divorced
- **Hobbies** Jazz-dancing
- **Name** Hilary Jones
- **Age** 22
- **Job** Unemployed - degree in ancient history
- **Accommodation** Live at home (with my parents)
- **Family** Engaged
- **Hobbies** Classical music - playing the violin

## Step 6

Finally students are given a blank sheet to fill in as homework. In the next lesson they introduce themselves as a fictional character of their own invention. Alternatively they might like to present themselves as a famous person or a historical figure. To match international goals of courses, students might be encouraged to take the role of a foreigner. At this point the principle of using notes and not a written text has to be emphasized.

Using your own imagination, pretend you are someone else. Make notes below. Now introduce your new self to the class using your notes.

- **Name**
- **Age**
- **Job**
- **Accommodation**
- **Family**
- **Hobbies**

After the above activities, students are given the following hand-out to help them structure their own presentations. More confident or capable students may not need as much guidance. We normally tell students that they are free to structure the presentation in their own way, but may use the questions as a guide if they prefer to. They are completely free to choose their topic with no pressure from the teacher at all. Students should be strongly encouraged to borrow any equipment they need to make their talks more interesting. Some students use videos to illustrate their talks. Others bring sports equipment, demonstrate judo or even hip-hop dancing. One apparently quiet student has even demonstrated and explained magic tricks in English involving volunteer students in his demonstrations. Students who may have appeared reluctant to speak in class suddenly become loquacious when demonstrating their hobby.

## Preparation for Oral Presentation

Here are a few questions that could help you organise your presentation. You don't have to use them if you don't want to. But remember that you **MUST NOT** write a text, just use notes on cue cards. You should make the sentences as you are

presenting your topic to the class.

## Introduction

1. What's your name?
2. What are you going to tell us about today?
3. Why did you choose this topic?
4. When did you start doing this hobby, activity, sport, etc.?
5. Where did you start?
6. How old were you when you started?
7. Did someone influence your choice?

## Main Body

8. Can you describe this hobby, activity, sport, or place ? (Give details and examples)
9. What are the positive points?
10. What are the negative points?

## Conclusion

11. Do you still do this hobby/activity/sport, etc.?
12. If not, why ?
13. Has this hobby, activity, sport, place, etc. helped you improve (physically, psychologically, socially, etc.)
14. To conclude your presentation, you could tell your friends that you'll be happy to answer any questions they may have.

PLEASE NOTE: If you decide to describe your home town or a place that you particularly like, some of these questions WILL NOT apply (for example: 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 - 11 - 12 )

After the presentation students are encouraged to answer questions and naturally the teacher might also want to join in with his/her questions or reactions. At this stage the teacher may also want to pick out a few language points which stem naturally from the student's talk for further practice with the whole class. While this may seem to be rather unstructured with little practice of language structure, students do get practice in formulating different kinds of questions and in transforming notes into a coherent flow of speech. When this kind of activity really works, language teachers no longer need to feel -as Conrad's narrator - that they are asking students to be mere "talking animals" parroting responses which they may never be called upon to use. They are reacting to the students' reality, which is a far more demanding role than standing at the front of the class conducting the students through meaningless drills or exercises in which words are truly "the foes of reality".

## References

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