

Presentations

Jon Naunton offers practical tips and ideas about how you can help your students become better presenters

Many schools and universities require students to give presentations. It is difficult enough to present successfully in one's own language, let alone a foreign language. A shy and timid learner in his or her own language will not miraculously become a fantastic presenter in English! This article will examine how we can help students become better presenters by developing their confidence and improving their preparation. Good presenters say something interesting, which they communicate in a lively and memorable way – it is a true performance art. Nevertheless, I sincerely believe that good presenters are made, not born, and that even those learners who lack self-confidence can be transformed into acceptably confident, albeit not brilliant, presenters.

Confidence building

Using sub-groups

The stress presenters feel tends to grow with the size of the audience they address. In most cases, during the training process, the audience will be other class members. I teach larger groups of up to 30; breaking them up into sub-groups can be useful. Speaking in front of six people is usually less intimidating than speaking in front of thirty. Arranging the classroom into different zones means three or four students can present simultaneously. Not only is this a more efficient use of classroom time, but it shifts the focus away from a sole individual. I generally play background music to reduce distraction between groups.

Choose familiar topics

When students start to present, I believe they should begin with familiar, everyday topics which require little preparation. The aim here is, quite simply, to get them on their feet and overcome the block of standing up in front of other people. I often give them a menu of topics to choose from, which require little specialised knowledge or vocabulary, e.g. public transport in my town, a national celebration etc. (The first few sessions, I don't ask them to prepare anything for homework as they can worry too much.) Students who have picked the same topic from the menu can work together in pairs or groups by subject. I allow them a few minutes to write down a few key ideas, and move round the class ready to provide a missing expression or quick translation. Then they present to the other members of their sub-group, making sure the same topic isn't dealt with at the same time as this can be distracting!

Poster presentations

Poster presentations are a great way of providing students with lots of practice in a less threatening environment. Again, it is a useful activity for those of us who teach large classes and a common approach at conferences. I usually treat it as a collaborative activity with three or four people working on the same poster. I show a model of the kind of thing I expect – you can see an example on page 94 of ProFile Upper Intermediate. Students produce a poster on one or two large sheets of paper; pages from a flip-chart are ideal. This will usually mean meeting up for one or two sessions before the exhibition. They make the poster as visually interesting as they can and include the main points of their presentation – you need to emphasize that the poster is not a script which they simply read aloud. Six or seven posters are enough for a small exhibition. Display the posters in different parts of the classroom or a reception area or school cafeteria. Student takes it in turns to stand by their poster and talk visitors through it, while the other members of the poster team move around freely. Invite people from other classes to visit and ask questions. This will give students a taste of speaking to people outside their immediate class. Telling students that the head of department is coming provides a further incentive!

Preparation and research

Most good presenters readily admit that their success is a result of careful preparation and practice. Generally speaking, a presentation is a piece of carefully constructed writing delivered as an extended monologue and is often the result of research. However, expert speakers understand that there is no point in reading out detailed information or research findings. Instead, they recognize the need to keep their message much simpler than in a text which is meant to be read. They will regularly summarize, return to their main points, and say the same thing in different ways, so listeners have several opportunities to catch their message.

By contrast, lazy or unaware students sometimes think it is enough to find an interesting article and read it out to the rest of the class. This is usually catastrophic for the following reasons:

- ✓ Articles often contain rare and difficult vocabulary and expressions unknown to the audience. This is frequently made worse by the reader's poor pronunciation.
- ✓ Articles may assume some kind of shared background knowledge with the reader. (A story which has been running for some time will often just add what is most recent to the tale.)
- ✓ Articles are not meant to be read aloud. The information load is dense and there is little repetition or redundancy. Remember that when we read, we can return to the text as often as we need. Simply reading the text once does not allow listeners extra chances they need.

Presentation as a process

I believe the most important thing we can do as teachers is to make students aware of the process they need to engage in to produce an effective presentation from source material. I often follow these steps.

1. I find a text and read it aloud, making many of the typical mistakes of pronunciation, poor delivery, and absence of eye contact common in these cases! I then ask the class what the article I have just read was about. Few, if any, can answer confidently!
2. I hand out examples of the text and get them to read it. Then we begin the business of paraphrasing and simplification. We re-phrase complex sentences; identify rare or unknown words, idioms and expressions, either eliminating them altogether, or substituting items which our listeners are more likely to know.
3. We then identify the main and subsidiary points of the article and decide which key ideas we are going to take.
4. Perhaps most importantly, we then discuss what background knowledge the article assumes, and how we can supply this with a more general and clear introduction.
5. Finally, we re-assemble the text into a coherent summary which can form the basis of a presentation.

Problems with language

Obviously, how well a student presents will be linked with their general level of English. Furthermore, the language they need to move sure-footedly through will be different according to the type of presentation. A presentation which deals with the presentation of facts and figures or trends will require different words and expressions from, say, a presentation which describes a process. Even good students may stumble moving between points, because they are unsure with the introductory expressions and phrases.

Ideally, I would always try to find the time to provide students with some kind of model of the presentation type, and then analyse the language used to move from point to point, enumerate, refer to data, make contrasts and so on. For instance, if I want my students to describe a process, then I will give a short talk on how to make home-made beer! I will then go over it and isolate and teach/revise the key phrases used for describing a process. These I will drill and practise in the normal way, and expect to see in their own presentations at a later date. Sadly, time is usually too short to allow each presentation genre to be dealt with in such a way so we may simply need to supply a

check list of introductory phrases and expressions. There is an appendix which you can download at the top of this page I feel sure you can add to.

Problems with delivery and over dependence on the text

This is largely a matter of encouraging students to be independent of their text/script. A way of doing this is to use a memory aid such as cue cards, or OHP transparencies or PowerPoint technology which both the presenter and audience can follow. I do my best to discourage students from using the distracting gimmicks in software packages. I also tell them to avoid complicated graphs and statistics. It is better to have these on a separate handout which people can refer to at their leisure.

Eye contact

Even if a talk is carefully prepared, the convention is that we have to pretend that we are talking to the audience. Even if they are reading from a script, speakers need to raise their heads and look at their audience. One technique is to choose three people in their audience; e.g. someone near the front, someone in the middle right, and a third person in the far back. Shifting your gaze between these points will create the impression that the whole audience is being addressed.

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He has written several coursebooks including Clockwise Upper Intermediate and Head for Business for Oxford University Press. He holds an MA in Second Language Learning and Teaching from the University of London, and an MBA from the City University Business School.