

Conference Reports

Classroom Activities for Building Speech Skills - with Roehl Sybing

Abstract

On Saturday, November 21, 2015 at the JALT International Conference in Shizuoka Japan, Roehl Sybing of Nanzan Junior College conducted a lively workshop entitled "Classroom Activities for Building Speech Skills." The following paper highlights four activities that teachers can use to help students prepare for oral presentations. This report walks the reader through the four activities that Sybing presented called "Interview," "Tour Guide," "Seminar," and "Mirror."

It can be difficult to get EFL students to practice for speeches or to speak spontaneously in them. At the 2015 JALT International Conference in Shizuoka, Roehl Sybing's hour-long workshop introduced four exercises to help students become more comfortable with impromptu speaking while increasing fluency. The goals of the activities are to reduce student anxiety and add accountability for preparation of students' speeches. Sybing attracted a full house: Thirty-five participants attended the workshop to enjoy his witty delivery and fast-paced, fun, pair and group activities.

Background

In Sybing's presentation course at Nanzan Junior College, students prepare speeches in a separate writing class and deliver it at the end of the term in the speaking class. Sybing demonstrated each activity rather than just lecturing. This style is more effective for helping the "learners" remember the information presented (Bruner, 1960). The activities he walked the participants through were "Interview," "Tour Guide," "Seminar," and "Mirror."

Activities

Interview

"Interview" is a great warm-up activity that can be used in any speaking class. Students are in groups of four. In each round, one student is the speaker and three are the "audience". The teacher writes a proficiency-appropriate prompt on the board such as "What is your favorite _____?" One member of the group asks the prompt question by completing it with information of their choosing (e.g., TV program, food, vacation spot, holiday, etc.). Sybing gives his students about five seconds to get an idea. The student speaks for 30 seconds, after which, the other three members of team ask questions about the impromptu "speech". This replicates the spontaneous

Q&A sessions after a presentation. This process is repeated three more times to give each student in the group a chance to speak. Each round, the prompt question is asked by a different student using a different idea to fill in the blank. After four rounds, each student has asked a different question and given a 30-second talk. As the semester progresses, the “speech” time can be increased gradually as students gain more confidence.

Sybing mentioned that the small audience of three in the above activity helps to minimize anxiety and gives students practice adlibbing. The Q&A session also provides students with feedback. This exercise allows for both meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output, two of strands needed in language-learning courses (Nation, 2013).

Tour Guide

The next activity was “Tour Guide”. In this paired exercise, students bring their prepared speeches, which they have practiced as homework. Partner A gives a copy of his/her speech to Partner B. While standing, A recites his/her speech, and B, sitting and reading along with the text, helps out if A cannot remember what comes next. Once the speech is completed, the students switch roles: Partner B reads his speech, and A helps when needed. Sybing emphasized that the speech does not need to be recited word for word. The teacher should remind the students that if the *meaning* is conveyed, no correction is needed.

“Tour Guide” gives students another opportunity to practice and memorize their speeches in pairs. Again, anxiety is reduced with one-on-one practice and students begin to feel more comfortable with the content of their speeches. Not all students will take the time to practice at home. However, in class, they are accountable to their partner who is reading along and listening at the same time. The partner who is listening and prompting is also getting meaning-focused input similar to paired reading, one of the top 20 language-learning activities (Nobuoka et al., 2015).

Seminar

“Seminar” can be done in pairs or groups. Based on questions similar to those used in the “Interview”, the student has 30 seconds to prepare a 2-minute speech. Sybing told his audience to have students create mind maps rather than write out sentences. Thirty seconds leaves only enough time to quickly jot down the main idea with two or three supporting ideas. It forces the students to think quickly. After the preparation time, one student stands up and gives the 2-minute speech from the mind map outline. When the two minutes are up, other students in the group ask questions about the speech. Again, students must pay attention to what is being said in order to create meaningful questions. This exercise helps students use their memory and practice speaking from an outline rather than a written speech.

Mirror

The final activity Sybing shared was “Mirror”. In this exercise, students deliver their prepared speeches to an audience of three. The three students listen and write an outline or mind map of what they hear. This activity checks students’ comprehension and also checks whether the students are working on memorizing their speeches. In addition, when the students compare the outlines to their speeches they can check the organization of its content.

Near the end of the workshop, there were a few questions. One participant asked why these activities were done in groups and seemed doubtful that students would do the work. Sybing reiterated that group work lessens the anxiety that students feel so they are more willing to speak. It also saves time in class: more students are speaking more often, rather than having one student speak to the entire class. It was mentioned by another participant that Paul Nation has a great paper on how to keep students accountable during group work by using a cooperative learning approach (<http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/publications/paul-nation/1989-Group-work.pdf>). Another participant asked why Sybing had the students stand or sit during the exercises. Sybing's reply was that it resembles actual presentation performances in which the speaker will be standing and the audience will be sitting.

Sybing encouraged his audience to use video to show students how they are doing and so that they can reflect on their own performance (gestures, and speaking skills). Another way to build body-language awareness is to have one student mimic all the movements and gestures of the speaker during the practice speech. This gives feedback about possible distracting movements.

Conclusion

Sybing emphasized the time and effort it takes to deliver a speech in a second language. The enjoyable and easy-to-prepare activities help students prepare to deliver their speeches and manage impromptu speaking during Q&A. Each activity can be adapted for any oral communication class. All the activities were interactive with a strong emphasis on speaking and listening skills. Because each activity is rather unique, students will not become bored from practicing or repeating the same activities. With "Interview" and "Seminar", a variety of questions with various grammar points can be used in different lessons. Having listeners take notes and/or ask questions requires students to pay attention while building their language skills. Sybing's workshop was well worth the hour investment among many competing presentations at the JALT conference.

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References

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