

My Room

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One problem I encounter in my public speaking classes in university is what I call "speech fatigue." Students sometimes get tired of giving and listening to speeches every week. This activity is designed to break up that fatigue by making the presentation mostly dependent on gestures and visuals rather than oral communication.

Gestures are a vital part of public speaking and communication in general. Cook et al. (2013) showed the explanatory power of gestures by showing to 184 children some videotaped math lessons. The students who watched a lesson that used speech and gesture learned more than students who watched a lesson that used speech only. Use of gesture also helps people think better. Nicoladis et al. (2007) asked bilingual children to tell a story once in their first language and next in their second language. They observed that the children were using gestures more often in their first language. Nicoladis et al. (2007) conclude that memory and gesture are connected and the act of gesturing aids recall.

I teach this lesson in a public speaking course for first year students in university. I find it useful for both beginner and advanced classes. In this activity each student gives a two-part speech. The first part is a non-verbal, gesture-based explanation of the student's room and its contents. The second part is a verbal explanation of a poster of the room.

In the first part, the students give a speech about their rooms focusing on the shape of the room and at least six things in the room. The student giving the speech (Student A) uses only gestures. The audience tries to draw Student A's room while watching the speech. The audience calls out what Student A is explaining.

For example, when Student A makes a sleeping gesture, the audience calls out "Bed!" If Student A gestures that they are correct, the students draw a bed. In the second part of the speech, Student A verbally explains a poster of the room and the audience checks if they drew the room and its contents correctly or not.

This activity should be done with a class that has already had a lot of practice with gestures, especially the game of charades. This activity is a good introduction to backchanneling as the student giving the speech must listen to the feedback from the audience to decide whether the audience understands the content of the speech or not. The audience must provide this feedback in the form of backchanneling. This is teaching students how to be good audience members. It is also an easy introduction to explaining visuals in PowerPoint presentations. Visuals in PowerPoint presentations have a tendency to become very complex. Thus it is a good idea to get the students started by explaining simple visuals that they are very familiar with. "My Room" is a topic that all students can relate to easily.

Preparation

Make a poster of your room. The week before doing this activity, model the speech for your students. Have the students draw your room while you gesture. To encourage backchanneling, make a few of the gestures deliberately vague. Hopefully this will elicit requests for clarification from the students. Take this opportunity to teach the phrases in the appendix. Next, use your poster for students to check their answers. Tell the students that they will have to make a poster of their own room for homework and to be prepared to give a speech similar to your own in the next lesson.

Procedure

- 1) Make small groups (3-4 students in each group). Give out some paper, one sheet for each student.
- 2) The students, one at a time, practice both parts of the speech in the small group and try to draw their friend's room. The students should stand up to give the speech.
- 3) The students give the speech one by one in front of the whole class.

Variation

Instead of each student giving the speech in front of the whole class, each group could choose only one student to give the speech in front of the whole class. This would save time and some students would be more comfortable doing the speech in front of their small group only.

Conclusion

This activity is mostly non-verbal so it gives students with lower English abilities the chance to do as well as students with higher English abilities. I have found sometimes that the unmotivated lower-level student that sits in the back of the class often suddenly becomes a rock star. This lesson changes what it means to "give

a speech" and to "listen to a speech". Usually, the student giving the speech is talking and the audience is silent. In this lesson, that pattern is reversed. The speech is given using mostly non-verbal communication and the audience is required to speak. This gives all students a chance to recover from their speech fatigue.

References

- Cook, S., Duffy, R., & Fenn, K. (2013). Consolidation and transfer of learning after observing hand gesture. *Child Development*. Retrieved Month Day, Year, from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cdev.12097/abstract;jsessionid=9FC06F824D9698BD98913B2FD78BBD85.d04t03>
- Nicoladis, E., Pika, S., Yin, H., & Marentette, P. (2007). Gesture use in story recall by Chinese-English bilinguals. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 28, 721-735.

Appendix Useful Phrases

Please do it again.

I didn't get that.

Do you mean...?

Let me check...

What is that?

Is that a....?

Please slow down.

Where is the....?