

DEVELOPING EAP SPEAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

For EAP students, speaking is often seen as the least important skill. However, many will find themselves required to give academic presentations in English and to take part in academic discussions. This paper looks at ways of developing those skills, in ways which also promote independent learning. The context is the development of EAP speaking materials for a UK pre-sessional programme (i.e. before students start their studies), and consideration will also be given to the importance of guidance for teachers. Many of the issues discussed here, of course, also apply to English for business contexts.

KEY WORDS: Academic presentations, academic discussions, independent learning, pre-sessional programmes

RESUMEN

Entre los estudiantes de EAP, la expresión oral está a menudo considerada como la destreza menos importante. Sin embargo, muchos de ellos tendrán que hacer presentaciones en inglés y tomar parte en debates académicos. Este trabajo presta atención a las estrategias para desarrollar esas destrezas, de tal manera que también se fomente el aprendizaje independiente. El contexto es el desarrollo de materiales para la expresión oral en EAP para el programa pre-académico en el Reino Unido (antes de que los estudiantes comiencen sus estudios), y también se considerará la importancia de la orientación para los profesores. Por supuesto, muchos de los temas que se plantean aquí también se pueden aplicar al inglés que se utiliza en los negocios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Presentaciones académicas, debates académicos, aprendizaje independiente, programas pre-académicos.

1. INTRODUCTION

In British academic contexts, assessment is usually based on written performance: exams, essays, reports, dissertations and theses. Reading and listening clearly feed into the production of these written texts, but the role of speaking is seen by many students as less central. As a result, academic speaking is very often the Cinderella skill. However, 'insiders' within these cultures (successful students,

academic staff) see speaking skills as playing an important part in academic life on campus, especially at post-graduate level (see Jordan 1997 for discussion of these skills). Developing these skills is, therefore, an important aim for any English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme.

The speaking activities focussed on in this paper were developed in a second language EAP context, with mixed nationality classes on a UK university pre-session course, where students are prepared to enter their specialist subject English-medium departments. However, I would argue that the theoretical background and principles underlying the production of these materials apply to all contexts: ESL or EFL; English for Academic or Business or General Purposes.

This paper will begin by briefly looking at what is known about the good language learner and learning strategies. We will then turn to the issue of developing these skills and strategies in the specific context of EAP speaking. As Tudor argues (1997: 98), teaching language for specific purposes ‘involves an insightful analysis of target situations with a view to the establishment of relevant and attainable goals and the translation of those goals into a coherent course of study’. A suitable textbook can greatly help the teacher in providing that coherent course of study. The materials developed for the EAP speaking course in question resulted in the publication of a textbook (Rignall & Furneaux 1997), helping, we hope, teachers beyond our programme to put theory into practice.

2. BACKGROUND

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As long ago as 1975, Rubin (1975: 45-47) listed the following characteristics of the good language learner:

1. is a willing and accurate guesser
2. has a strong drive to communicate, or to learn from communication
3. is often not inhibited
4. is prepared to attend to form (as well as communication)
5. practises
6. monitors his own speech and that of others
7. attends to meaning.

Successful learners know how to learn; they have acquired efficient learning strategies which they know how to use with confidence in flexible ways appropriate to the learning task. They can perform independently of the teacher. Not all students, however, fall into this category. Our job as teachers is to help our learners achieve such strategies. Studies show weaker students can improve (see O’Malley and Chamot 1990), with motivation and appropriate instruction. They often fail not because of lack of ability (about which very little can be done), but because of lack of appropriate strategies (about which a lot can be done).



Learner strategies are consciously selected by learners, and therefore the element of choice is implicit in their use. According to Cohen (1998), L2 language learner strategies encompass the following:

1. L2 language learning strategies (for example, 'identifying the material that needs to be learned... grouping it for easier learning', *ibid*: 5)
2. L2 language use strategies, which include four sets of sub-strategies:
 - retrieval: this is calling up material from storage in the memory
 - rehearsal: of target language structures (as, for example in form-focused practice)
 - cover: these are compensatory or coping strategies (e.g. memorised chunks of language or simplification)
 - communication: this is conveying a message.

We need to help students develop their strategic competence. Canale and Swain (1980) introduced this term to refer to compensatory strategies. Bachman and Palmer (1996: 7) broadened the definition to: 'a set of metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide cognitive management function in language use'. Metacognitive strategy use includes the following components:

- goal-setting: identifying tasks and deciding what to do
- assessment: deciding what is needed, what one has to work with, how well one has done
- planning: deciding how to use one's knowledge of the topic and of the language.

Metacognitive knowledge (knowing how to do something) is fundamental to strategic competence. It requires three kinds of knowledge:

1. person knowledge: general knowledge about how people learn and of ourselves as learners;
2. strategic knowledge: about strategies and how to approach tasks;
3. task knowledge: about task purpose, answering questions like:
'Why should I do this task?'
about task classification: 'What kind of task is this?'
about task demands: 'How should I do this task?'

(from Wenden 1991: Ch. 3 & 1995:18)

Of these three, task knowledge is the most neglected in the ELT classroom, and we therefore need to work with learners in this area in EAP programmes. It links up closely with the notion of 'noticing' in language learning (see Schmidt 1990), extending it to include noticing what is involved in language tasks as well as in language form.

In the context of a course to develop students speaking skills, therefore, we need:

- to make our students aware of the characteristics of good speakers;
- to help them develop effective spoken language learner strategies;
- to build up their strategic competence in speaking and
- to develop their metacognitive knowledge about themselves as speakers and about the speaking tasks they will need to take part in.

All this needs to be done, of course, with meaningful practice in tasks that, as far as possible, mirror the real-world tasks the students will have to perform when they leave the language course. Let us now turn to one such context.

CONTEXT FOR MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The materials development project that led to the production of the speaking materials under consideration in this paper was part of a pre-sessional English language programme at a British university.

Such programmes prepare international students for academic study before they enter their chosen subject-specialist departments. Typically, they are intensive programmes with around 23 hours of classes a week, lasting from one month to one year. Students take the length of course appropriate to their current level. On most such programmes students are divided into classes by linguistic level, not subject specialization, so the materials used have to be accessible to students from a wide range of academic subject backgrounds. Components usually include individual skills and integrated, project-type classes where all four skills are brought together.

The speaking materials discussed here were produced by teachers who had been involved with these programmes at the University of Reading over a number of years. They were piloted on several courses, with feedback from teachers and students leading to many revisions.

ACADEMIC SPEAKING

Before we could start to produce our materials, we needed to decide what academic speaking entails. Regular discussions with colleagues in other departments give us a clear idea of the requirements of formal oral presentations. What exactly constitutes a 'seminar' is more problematic. Members of our academic team undertook research into seminars in a variety of academic departments (see Furneaux et al. 1991) to identify common ground.

We also turned to the literature. Jordan (1996: 193) identifies the following typical situations and activities in ESL environments, such as ours in the UK:

- asking questions in lectures
- participation in seminars/discussions



- making oral presentations; answering ensuing questions/points
- verbalising data and giving oral instructions in seminars/workshops/ laboratories
- tutorials/supervision
- discussions with fellow students.

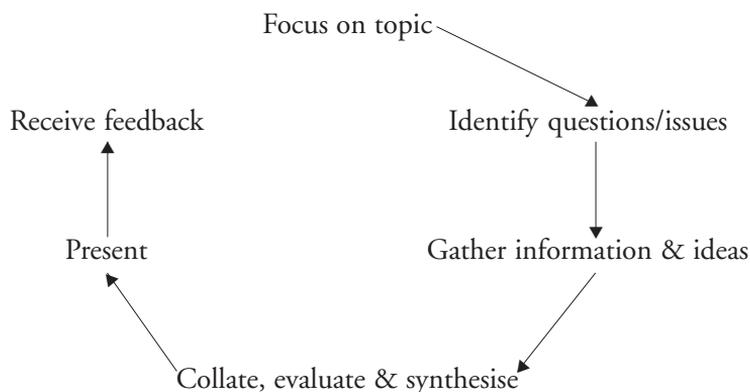
The majority of our students are post-graduates and our research combined with feedback from receiving departments and ex-students led us to the following specific aims: ‘to improve the students’ ability to:

- give short oral presentations effectively;
 - contribute to seminar discussions appropriately and fluently;
 - follow the contributions made to the discussion by others;
 - assess their performance in discussion and presentation skills.’
- (Furneau & Rignall 1997: ix)

3. THE SPEAKING MATERIALS

THE OVERALL FRAMEWORK

In any academic context (and also in many other ESP contexts), students will need to develop skills within what we identified as the basic study cycle:



(Rignall & Furneau 1997: ix)

This is the cycle EAP students must go through whether writing or speaking. Process writing approaches (as outlined, for example, in White and Arndt 1991) have been prevalent in ESL EAP contexts since the 1980s. Such approaches have made students more aware of what is involved in skill development and have encouraged learners to think about their learning. This, hopefully, means that stu-

dents who have experienced a process approach to writing will be receptive to academic speaking courses that require them to be independent learners and take responsibility for their own learning. This requires changes in the roles of students and teachers, which both need to understand and be comfortable with. To promote these changes, we described to both groups the principles underlying the course.

PRINCIPLES FOR LEARNERS

The key principles for learners we established (see Rignall & Furneaux 1997: ix, x) are:

- ‘Think about your learning.’ This incorporates the goal-setting and assessment components of metacognitive strategy use. It includes, for example, clarification of needs in spoken English (see Appendix 1 for an example of a relevant task), establishing how you learn best, your progress so far, and what you can do to make further progress.
- ‘Think, plan and rehearse for tasks’; this is part of the planning component of metacognitive strategy use and also develops the L2 language use strategies of retrieval and rehearsal. Appendix 2 shows students the phases/stages many speakers go through in preparing a presentation, helping to build up task knowledge. Students are helped to understand what these phases involve and the kind of questions a presenter must ask him/herself at each stage. They are encouraged to go through these processes themselves when giving an oral presentation.
- ‘Seek and make use of feedback on your performance’; this is part of the assessment component (see Appendix 3 and Appendix 4).
- ‘Be an active listener and speaker, monitoring your own speech and other people’s, drawing on what is known of the good language learner.’
- ‘Keep your language records up to date: especially of useful expressions and vocabulary.’ (thus noticing at the language level).
- ‘Make use of language reference books.’

As can be seen, the aim is very much to develop learner independence: to give students the resources they need to take part in academic speaking tasks within their individual academic departments and to continue to improve their performance in these areas after they leave us.

DEVELOPING LEARNER INDEPENDENCE

An ‘Independent Learner’ section at the back of the textbook, brings together all the documents that contribute to this aspect (a Learner questionnaire, feedback checklists etc), but it is throughout the materials that the independence is, hopefully, built up.



For example, there are review stages after more complex tasks which encourage the learner to think back over his/her experience of carrying out the task and focus on what was learnt from the task. After presentations and discussions, students are encouraged to reflect on their own, other people's and (in discussion) the group's performance, identifying strengths and what could be improved for next time. This is done in class discussion and individually via feedback checklists. In addition, students are asked to make individual notes in a learner diary on the skill focus of a unit (e.g. taking part in a discussion). At a linguistic level, each unit ends with a language review task which asks the students to focus on a particular function (e.g. expressing proportion) and to add items they have identified as useful for them to those provided in the book. The same thing is done for the vocabulary topic of the unit. All these activities will, it is hoped, get students into the habit of reflecting on oral tasks and their performance, identifying what they have learnt and need to work on further.

4. THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Of course, none of the aims for our speaking materials will be met if the teachers do not understand or follow them. As Woods (1996: 184) points out '...the teacher's beliefs, assumptions (*re language, language learning and language teaching*) and knowledge play an important role in how the teacher interprets events related to teaching (both in preparation for teaching and in the classroom), and thus affect the teaching decisions that are ultimately made'. Textbooks are an attempt to influence all three aspects of a teacher's make-up. However, as Glendinning (1997: 131) says,

Can textbook writers influence *how* the ESP teacher teaches? We cannot 'teacher-proof' materials. Teachers teach the way they want to teach, the way they think is best regardless of textbook writers.

He does conclude, however: 'But textbook writers can seek to influence.' (ibid). The influence of published materials is such that many teachers worldwide encounter and come to adopt new methodologies through textbooks. There is, therefore, an important role for the teacher's book accompanying a core textbook here.

THE TEACHER'S BOOK

In our materials, a detailed Teacher's Book is one of the main ways we seek to 'influence' teaching. It also, of course, provides considerable teacher support. The role of the Teacher's Book here is:

- to inform (Map of the Course, Introduction: Aims of the Course, Contents, Principles for Teachers, Timetabling and selecting units, Standard Task types etc);



- to guide (via the overtly stated Principles for Teachers and through the notes on each unit);
- to give transcripts and answer keys, where appropriate.

PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHERS

A recent study by Breen et al. (2001) has emphasised the links between teachers' principles and classroom practice. In our speaking materials, we state our key principles very explicitly: this endorses the principles of teachers who bring a similar understanding of what is involved in teaching speaking and seeks to influence the principles of those who do not. The principles are expressed and justified as follows (Furneaux & Rignall 1997: x-XIII):

- Focus on skill. It is not enough to focus on language to successfully perform complex tasks in a second language. Students need to be able to use their linguistic knowledge to carry out a range of academic speaking tasks in appropriate ways. In order to do this, they need to perform whole tasks (e.g. a complete presentation or discussion) and then to analyse and assess their performance on specific aspects.
- Language resource improvement. L2 learners do, however, also need to expand their existing linguistic resources, especially of the language needed to perform the tasks being focused on. As teachers, we need to help learners find effective ways of recording and organising their language knowledge and to help them use the resources (both internal and external) available to them.

There is a common danger of EAP students becoming fluent but fossilised (see Johnson 1992). These learners have expert cover strategies and are reasonable communicators, but have many inaccuracies in their fluent speech. The teacher can counter fossilisation by:

1. Encouraging learners to plan for language tasks in advance and to rehearse. This can even be done for discussion, by posing questions such as: What do you want to say on this topic? What do you think other people's views may be?
 2. Giving clear feedback on errors that most affect performance at the end of a speaking activity.
 3. Giving remedial mini-lessons on specific language items as the need arises.
 4. Directing students to the most appropriate remedial work to do outside class.
- Independent learning. This means clearly explaining the rationale and aims of courses and activities and explicitly encouraging the development of independence (e.g. with learner diaries which encourage students to reflect on their learning).



- Maximum feedback. This can be from peers (who can give feedback on content, organisation, presentation and style) and from the teacher (giving feedback on the same areas as peers and/or on language). Such feedback needs to be immediate and, ideally, the student can refer to it with an audio or video recording of his/her performance in an oral presentation.

NEW TEACHERS' BRIEFING

In addition, all teachers new to the programme undergo training sessions which focus on:

- the speaking course rationale and aims
- differences between this course and others the participants may have experienced
- how this course fits into the whole programme
- the underlying principles for teachers of the course
- task types
- classroom procedure
- how to give feedback.

5. CONCLUSION

As a producer of teaching materials to be used by others, you have to accept that they may not be used, either by teachers or students, exactly as you intended. However, the role of any materials is to provide appropriate input and tasks based on what is known about how people learn and the language skill or skills being focussed on. Teachers and students will then make these materials their own to meet the needs of individual groups.

You also have to accept that making students aware of what is involved in performing well (showing them learner strategies, developing metacognitive strategy use and their metacognitive knowledge) does not mean they can necessarily do it themselves—but it is the first step on the way. Feedback from some of the receiving departments into which our preessional students have gone has included comments like: 'We wish our native-speaker students could give such good presentations'. Raising awareness of what is involved and giving practice in it, with the opportunity to evaluate and reflect on that practice, gives students the resources they need to go on developing their language skills long after they leave the language classroom.



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APPENDIX 1

EXAMPLE OF A TASK TO CLARIFY NEEDS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

Form a group and discuss the following statements:

- a) I want to speak English with a perfect native-speaker accent.
- b) I want to speak English without a single grammatical mistake.
- c) I must enlarge my vocabulary in order to improve my spoken English.
- d) I feel as though I am a different person when I speak English.
- e) If I read English, my spoken English will benefit as well...

Extract from Rignall & Furneaux 1997: 2.

APPENDIX 2

PREPARING AN ORAL PRESENTATION

Steps with examples of prompt questions.

PHASE 1: DEFINE THE TASK

STEP 1 Define presentation task: What is the purpose of the presentation?

STEP 2 Identify learning purpose: What will your criteria of success be?

PHASE 2: EXPLORE THE TOPIC

STEP 3 Generate ideas: What is interesting about this topic?

STEP 4 Look for shaping idea: What view of the topic are you proposing?

STEP 5 Collect information: What important gaps are there in your knowledge?

PHASE 3: PREPARE FOR THE AUDIENCE

STEP 6 Draft outline: How many major points can an audience take in during the time available?

STEP 7 Draft aids: What information is best presented visually?

STEP 8 Rehearse and evaluate: Did you manage to complete within the time limit?

STEP 9 Revise outline and aids

STEP 10 Present

PHASE 4: REVIEW

STEP 11 Seek feedback on performance: Did you hold the audience's interest?

STEP 12 Review learning: What have you learned from performing this task?

Rignall & Furneaux 1997: 114-117 (extracts).

APPENDIX 3

ASSESSING PRESENTATIONS: CHECKLIST

1. Was the presentation interesting? no / quite / yes
2. Did the speaker help you to follow the main points? no / a little / yes
3. If posters or OHTs were used, were they clear? no / quite / yes
4. Did the speaker maintain sufficient eye-contact with the audience? no / yes
5. Comment on the speaker's voice:
 - a) speed too fast / too slow / about right
 - b) volume too quiet / about right
 - c) pitch variation monotonous / expressive
6. Did the speaker help the audience to understand any unusual words that were used? no / yes
7. What could the speaker do to improve the presentation next time?

Rignall & Furneaux 1997: 112.

APPENDIX 4

REVIEWING DISCUSSION: CHECKLIST

PART 1: THE INDIVIDUAL

1. Was the discussion satisfactory? If not, why not?
2. Did you *think, plan and rehearse* in preparation for the discussion?
3. Did you ask for clarification when you did not follow a point?
4. Did you manage to make the points you noted down beforehand? If not, why not?
5. Did the other group members understand the points you made?
6. Did you correct any misunderstanding of your points?
7. Did the discussion deal with the points you made? If not, why not?
8. Is there something you wish you had said? Why did you not say it at the time?
9. Did you gain anything from the discussion? (For example, has it clarified or extended your thinking on the topic?).
10. What could you do next time to make for a better discussion.

PART 2: THE GROUP

11. Did the group manage the discussion effectively?
12. Did all group members feel they had the opportunity to contribute?
13. Did the discussion develop a shape or sense of direction? If not, why not?
14. What could the group do next time to make for a better discussion?

Rignall & Furneaux 1997: 11.

