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## **Idea Sharing: Using Peer Assessment to Teach How to Make Oral Summaries in English Language Classes**

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This article describes the techniques used when teaching oral summary making to the second-year students studying Business English at the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs of the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow. The techniques are based on peer assessment, which enables both teachers and students to save a lot of time. Also, the author of the article describes the advantages and disadvantages of the techniques and gives the assessment criteria used to estimate her students' oral summaries.

According to the requirements of the curriculum, students beginning from their first year of studies at university are to learn to 'understand and express the basic logical and emotional information contained in a text' (Tarev, Tareva, Yakusheva, 2011, p.8). Second-year students continue to work on developing their skills to summarize the content of a text. During their second year at university, students study the textbook 'English for Business Studies' by Ian Mackenzie (Mackenzie, 2010). The book consists of 28 units, each of which includes a text about key concepts of business and economics. As a rule, students prepare summaries of each text as a part of their homework and present their

summaries in the following class. At the end of an academic year, students take an exam, which consists of written and oral parts. The oral part of the exam includes a summary of an unfamiliar text, for which the students have 15 minutes to prepare.

### **Techniques of Teaching How to Summarize Texts**

Students start making summaries in their first year at university. Their summaries are always assessed by their teacher, not their peers. In the first class with second-year students, when they come back after summer holidays, it is useful to review the structure of a summary. A summary of a text should contain the following parts:

#### **1. Introduction**

In the introductory part of the text students are supposed to give the name of the text, the name of the author of the text and the name of the journal or a newspaper it was first published in, etc. If some part of the data is missing, students can omit them. Such data may include, for example, the name of the source or the number and the date of publication. In the texts, especially the short ones, provided in the textbook, the names of the authors are not given but are mentioned in the Teacher's book. I give my students such details as the names and date of publication from the Teacher's book so that they can include them in their summaries.

#### **2. The body of the summary**

At this stage, it is appropriate to remind the students that usually each paragraph of a text is on average summarized in one sentence. Here I also make them aware of the fact that they need to use all the necessary linking words and expressions to make smooth and logical transitions from one sentence to another, as well as from one paragraph to another. They should not use an

excessive amount of linking words and expressions as that can make their summary oversaturated and difficult for a listener (examiner).

### **3. The concluding sentence of the summary**

Here I deliberately do not use the term ‘conclusion’. Instead, I say a ‘concluding sentence’ as students are not expected either to give their own opinion on the text they sum up or to analyze it. The potential problem is that students, as experience has shown, often understand the word ‘conclusion’ too literally and jump at interpreting texts and giving their own viewpoints. It is important to get students to pay special attention to this structural part of the summary right from the very beginning in order to prevent their further attempts to interpret texts and express their attitude to what they have read as reading between the lines of a text and its interpretation refer to a completely different type of work on the text. In the last sentence, students only have to give the final idea of the author of the text in a grammatically correct and lexically appropriate way. It is also necessary to emphasize the fact that students should not substitute the summary of a text with its detailed retelling.

After reviewing the summary structure, students get their homework, which is to prepare an oral summary of the text that they have worked on previously in class. Preliminary work on a text includes comprehension exercises, work on the vocabulary and, if necessary, the grammar, as well as a discussion of the issues raised in the text. In addition, students read the summary assessment criteria (see Appendix) as homework to be prepared to work with them in the following session. My colleague Eleonora Temyanikova and I have elaborated the oral summary assessment criteria, based on the requirements for a brief presentation of an oral summary made by second-year students studying Business

English. Students receive the criteria via the Learning Management System (LMS).

### **Stages of Work on the Summary of a Text in Class**

#### **Stage 1**

In the following class the first thing to check is whether students understand the assessment criteria of oral summaries and how well they can use the criteria by asking comprehension questions. Then I ask one of the students to tell the class their version of the summary. I think it should be a student who is neither strong nor weak in terms of language proficiency as strong students might not need much help with their summaries and weak students may find the task difficult. Then we work on the summary following this algorithm:

1. I tell my students to listen to their peer's summary carefully, to take notes of all the mistakes that they hear (if there are any), and to write down all the questions that might occur when they listen to the summary presentation.

2. I tell them to look at the oral summary assessment criteria while they are listening and to be ready to give their comments based on the criteria.

3. When the student finishes making his/her summary, I analyze and evaluate the summary based on the assessment criteria and constantly referring to them so that my students could see how to work with the criteria. If the group consists mostly of strong students, then I sometimes write the mark on a piece of paper and without showing it to the students ask them to analyze the summary presentation and evaluate their peer's work using the assessment criteria. When they have finished I show them the mark I have given the student and give my reasons for it. Ideally, our marks will coincide as well as the reasons. Although, in practice, in first classes they are not always the same.

I believe it is useful to listen to 3-4 students in the same way during the first class. We can continue working likewise during the following few classes so that the students can confidently use the assessment criteria and could use them as arguments to justify the mark they decide to give their peers, and more importantly, can reflect on their own summaries.

### **Stage 2**

In a following class, I ask a strong student to make a presentation of the summary. The whole class listens to the student and assesses his/ her summary. Then I make comments on the student's summary and the way the other students assessed it as well as the way they have given arguments to justify the mark they have given. In this way, we listen to 2-3 strong students. The idea of this is to let the strong students set the tone or the model for the rest of the group. After that I divide all the students into several groups (usually three groups consisting of three people and occasionally one group consisting of a pair) and appoint one of the strong students who has just given his/her summary and got a mark for it, as the head of the group. In each group the students present their summaries. Then the group assesses the summaries referring to the assessment criteria. The head of the group has a casting vote. While the students work in groups the teacher should monitor them; that is, he/she moves quietly from one group to another, listening and fixing all the mistakes (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) and shortcomings (Scrivener, 2005, 93-94). If the class is small, the teacher can stay in the center of the classroom and monitor the work of several groups.

When the groups finish listening to the summaries and discussing them, the students appointed as the heads of each group announce the marks and give arguments for them. The teacher listens to the arguments and checks them with the notes

taken during the monitoring stage. In contentious cases (for example, students might not have noticed all the mistakes and drawbacks while listening to the summaries or when there is a doubt about an overstated/ understated mark) the teacher can ask the student whose summary caused questions to give the summary again, this time to the whole class, and to have the summary evaluated by the whole group. If the overestimation or underestimation of the mark is confirmed, the teacher can reduce the mark of the head of the mini group that he/she got at the beginning of the lesson for his/her summary. The teacher should warn about the responsibility for assessing the work and possible 'punishment' before the groups start to work. Practice shows that this warning significantly reduces the risk of giving too high or too low marks and thus improves the efficiency of group work and enhances the credibility of each group's marks.

We can work in the same way when strong students lead groups consisting of 3-4 people and have a casting vote when evaluating the summary during several classes.

### **Stage 3**

Next time the teacher can appoint students who are neither too strong nor weak to lead the mini groups and at the last stage – those students who are the weakest in the group. By 'stage' I mean not one class, but a series of classes, the number of which depends on the level of language proficiency of each group and is determined by the teacher.

### **Stage 4**

At early stages students work with the texts from the Student's book only, which they first work on in class (vocabulary work, etc.) and only then, at home, prepare summaries of the texts. As soon as students become competent enough at making oral summaries (the timing depends on students' level of language

proficiency – it might be either at the end of the semester or at the end of the academic year), we can move on to a new stage – making summaries of unfamiliar texts. At a suitable point, the teacher prepares a few texts based on the topic of the following class. Then, in class, students have 15 minutes to read one of the texts (it is the same text for the whole class) and to prepare a summary of it. Then they give their variants of the summary in pairs and assess the summary of their partner. To discourage students from intentionally overestimating their partner's summary (students often tend to sit next to and work with their friends), the teacher should divide the class into pairs himself/herself.

At this stage while students are working on the task the teacher should 'monitor discreetly showing his/her presence in the room but without offering help, interfering, correcting, etc.' (Scrivener, 2005, p.94). It is better not to leave students without any control by the teacher. (Sadler & Good, 2006, p.28). When students have finished listening to each other's summaries, they are supposed to analyze their partner's summary using the assessment criteria and announce their partner's marks. The teacher can listen to one or two students selectively especially in cases when students do not agree with their partner's mark and comments or the marks seem to be overestimated or underestimated.

Alternatively, and as a second option, the teacher can get the students to make a group summary. In this case, a student starts summarizing the text giving the introductory sentence, the next student makes the second sentence, and the third one continues summing up the text and so on until the last student in the chain makes the concluding sentence. As a third option, the teacher can use the snowball technique: the first student starts the summary, the second one repeats the first sentence and adds his/her own one, the third one repeats the previous sentences and comes up with his/her own one, etc. Such kind of work trains



students, first, to listen to each other carefully and critically; second, it trains them to use the linking words and expressions deftly to be able to build logical and smooth statements to continue not their own summary but the whole group's. Finally, it leaves no chance for them to stick to a prepared summary, to the one that they might have written beforehand while preparing the summary. It is quite possible to work in this format on several (2-3) unfamiliar texts during one 80-minute class.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to present arguments in favor of using the method of peer assessment that I use in my classes of Business English with second-year students. Peer assessment using the oral summary assessment criteria allows me to achieve the following:

First, the work in class becomes substantially optimized by saving the time it usually takes for the teacher to listen to all the students' summaries individually (Sadler & Good, 2006, p.2). The saved time can be used to do other activities in class (role plays, discussions of the topic they have been working on, review of the material they have studied so far, etc.).

Second, peer assessment 'saves teacher time' (Boud, 1989; Sadler and Good, 2006, p.2) as the teacher does not need to listen to the summaries during his/ her office hours, instead he/she can have more time to prepare for his/her classes.

Third, all the students manage to give their summaries in class and get comments and marks on their work immediately. That is peer assessment 'results in quicker feedback for students' (McLeod, 2001; Sadler & Good, 2006, p.2). This is especially relevant for the system of modular teaching, in which all students are supposed to have a cumulative mark that shows the result of a student's work during a module, which consists of 2 - 2.5 months.

Fourth, we should not forget that ‘peers can often spend more time and offer more detailed feedback than the teacher can provide’ (Weaver & Cotrell, 1986; Sadler & Good, 2006, p.2). This gives an opportunity to get detailed feedback from their partner and lets the peers learn through teaching and improving their summaries, taking into account the mistakes that their partner makes.

Fifth, students do not have any chance to relax in class as the simultaneous work of several groups and the teacher’s active monitoring make every student listen carefully to their peers and take active part in discussing the summaries they have heard and assessing them. When only the teacher listens to the summary and grades students’ work, the groups are likely to get distracted from the lesson; that is, they might stop benefiting from their time in class.

Finally, students gradually learn to evaluate the work of their peers objectively, each time using the oral summary assessment criteria. At early stages, the teacher's strict control is necessary. The teacher should actively monitor the work of the pairs or groups and sometimes listen selectively to some of the summaries again. Gradually active monitoring should become less active and ideally more discreet. Students are supposed to grade their peer’s summary not because their teacher is watching them but because they know what a good summary of a text is, that is they can hear all the strengths and weaknesses of the summaries and grade them using the assessment criteria. This will indicate that ‘students have managed to build an inner programme according to which they can perform actions’ (Zimnyaya, Kitrosskaya, Michurina, 2005, p.283); that is, external control turns into conscious self-control.

One of the few drawbacks of the described technique is that it works well in small classes only, consisting of a maximum of 12 students. In large classes the fact that it is impossible for the

teacher to control and monitor simultaneously several groups can seriously hamper the technique. I think this problem might be solved by involving an assistant, who could help the teacher control and monitor the work of the group.

The technique of teaching how to make summaries described in this article gives both the teacher and students a chance to significantly optimize the time spent in class and it allows students not only to listen to others' summaries but to hear all their own weaknesses and strengths; therefore, it lets them learn not only from their own but others' mistakes. During the presentation of their summaries students have an opportunity to learn, practice and improve their skills as 'every training enhances their knowledge and skills' (Biboletova, 2005, p.298). Besides, mutual control and peer assessment encourage students 'to form self-reflection and perform developing, stimulating and corrective functions' (Biboletova, 2005, p.298). Finally, the technique described in this article contributes to the development of a high level of self-control.

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## Appendix

### Oral Summary Assessment Criteria

Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3
General Organization (maximum 2 points)	Content (maximum 4 points)	Language (maximum 4 points)
<p><b>2 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a clear and logical structure (introduction, main part, concluding sentence);</li> <li>- clearly says what the title of the text is, who it is written by (if there is information given), where it is published (if there is information); what the text is devoted to (the gist);</li> <li>- uses a good range of cohesive devices (e.g. linking words) and organizational patterns with complete flexibility;</li> </ul> <p><b>1 point:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the structure is mainly clear and logical (lacks either an introduction or a concluding sentence);</li> <li>- clearly says what the title of the text is, who it is written by (if there is information given), where it is published (if there is information); what the text is devoted to (the gist);</li> <li>- uses a variety of cohesive devices and organizational patterns with complete flexibility;</li> </ul> <p><b>0 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- structure is unclear and illogical;</li> <li>- does not give any introductory information on the text;</li> <li>- does not use any linking words;</li> <li>- is not ready with the summary;</li> </ul>	<p><b>4 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- summarizes all the main points and makes a final statement;</li> <li>- does not add any extra information (e.g. the student's opinion or interpretation);</li> <li>- avoids giving details, quotations, information in brackets, repetitions, figures of speech, examples, figures and statistics;</li> </ul> <p><b>3 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identifies the most important points;</li> <li>- adds little information which was not mentioned in the text (e.g. the student's opinion);</li> <li>- gives few details, examples, figures, etc.;</li> </ul> <p><b>2 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- identifies only some of the important points;</li> <li>- adds some information which was not mentioned in the text (e.g. the student's opinion);</li> <li>- gives a few details, examples, figures, etc.;</li> </ul> <p><b>1 point:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- fails to identify all the important points;</li> <li>- adds the information which was not mentioned in the text;</li> <li>- gives a lot of details, examples, figures;</li> </ul> <p><b>0 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the student does not summarize but merely retells the text;</li> <li>- is not ready with the summary;</li> </ul>	<p><b>4 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the summary is made almost completely in the student's own words using appropriate active vocabulary (e.g. terminology from the subject area);</li> <li>- is aware of register (formal/ avoids informal language);</li> <li>- pronunciation is intelligible;</li> <li>- phonological features are used effectively to convey and enhance meaning (e.g. intonation)</li> </ul> <p><b>(makes no grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation mistakes)</b></p> <p><b>3 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the summary is made mostly in the student's own words using appropriate active vocabulary (e.g. terminology);</li> <li>- is aware of register (formal/ avoids informal language);</li> <li>- pronunciation is intelligible;</li> <li>- intonation is appropriate;</li> </ul> <p><b>(makes 1 grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation mistake)</b></p> <p><b>2 points:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- makes an attempt to use his own words;</li> <li>- shows a good degree of control of grammatical forms and uses appropriate vocabulary</li> <li>- makes more than 2 stylistic mistakes (informal register);</li> <li>- pronunciation is intelligible;</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- intonation is appropriate;</li> </ul> <p><b>(makes 2-3 mistakes (either grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation))</b></p> <p><b><u>1 point:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- makes no attempt to use his/her own words;</li> <li>- shows sufficient control of grammatical forms and uses appropriate vocabulary;</li> <li>- is not aware of register (informal register);</li> <li>- pronunciation is mostly intelligible;</li> <li>- intonation is generally appropriate</li> </ul> <p><b>(makes 4 mistakes (either grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation))</b></p> <p><b><u>0 points:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- makes no attempt to use his/her own words;</li> <li>- <b>makes more than 4 mistakes (either grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation)</b></li> <li>- is not ready with the summary;</li> </ul>
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The maximum score is 10 points.