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Developing Presentation Skills for Low Proficiency Students

Boonya Wichayathian

Introduction

This article discusses two activities I used in the presentation skill module of my Advanced Business Oral Communication (ABOC) classes¹ with groups of lower-intermediate third-year Commerce and Accountancy students at Chulalongkorn University. My goal was to help my students develop their presentation skills and have more self-confidence.

Generally, students are classified into sections based on their performance level in their previous English course, Business English Oral Communication (BEOC). Therefore, there is a tendency for students who are not in the top groups to have a negative attitude towards the course and their own ability. Since they perceive themselves as weak or poor learners, they don't put a lot of effort into learning and practising English.

For the presentation module, we use *Effective Presentations* as the core material. Supplementary sheets may be needed depending on each individual teacher. This year I taught two lower level groups who were not highly motivated. So, I tried to help them follow the course without making it too difficult and feel good about themselves.

Pronunciation Cards

Pronunciation is quite a big problem for weak students. I find that Thai students tend to speak English without proper stress or intonation; my ABOC students also faced this problem.

The lower group students do not have a chance to learn with native speaker teachers. This does not encourage them to be careful about their pronunciation because their Thai teachers are familiar with their English and can understand them without much difficulty. Concerned about this disadvantage, I always tell my students to be aware of this weak point and to overcome it.

I tried the following activity with my students. I expected to help them correct their pronunciation mistakes by selecting only some of their common errors. I focused on only the word level, not the sentence or paragraph level. However, from the sentence level, I took the vocabulary that they could not pronounce correctly; for example, "*I've divided my presentation into three main parts.*" All four highlighted words are the ones that I selected to be on the card. "**Three**" is a problem word of most Thai students. "**Presentation**" is one word that they pronounced incorrectly. "**Divided**" and "**parts**" are examples of the words with final sound that they didn't pronounce.

¹ Presentation skills is one of the two modules of the Advanced Business Oral Communication course, which is a required course for third-year students at Commerce and Accountancy Faculty. The other module is Meetings. Therefore, students have only about eight weeks to learn all things about presentations.

I designed two cards with 25 words for them to practice. On one card, the words were written normally, but on the other the same words were written with the clues for them to practice stress on the correct

syllable. To make it easier for them, I didn't use phonetic symbols, just upper case letters to make stressed syllables distinguishable from unstressed syllables.

service	three	overview	presentation	lastly
next	promotion	history	this	limited
profit	hundred	largest	growth	product
revenue	parts	divided	purpose	minutes
advantages	expand	available	background	business

Figure 1: Card A

SERvice	three	Overview	PREsenTation	LASTly
next	proMOTion	HIStory	this	LImited
PROfit	HUNdred	LARGEst	growth	PROduct
REVenue	parts	diVIded	PURpose	MInutes
AdVANTages	exPAND	aVAILable	BACKground	BUSIness

Figure 2: Card B

Procedure

- Have students sit in pairs.
- Give each pair two different pronunciation cards. (Figures 1 and 2) Tell them not to look at their friend's card.
- Give them about 5 minutes to practice pronouncing the 25 words on their cards with their partner.
- The teacher walks around to help check their pronunciation.
- Students with Card A pronounce the words while students with Card B check their partners' pronunciation.
- Ask each pair to swap cards and do the same process.
- When all pairs finish, tell students to return the cards with the clues.

- Pick up some students to demonstrate pronouncing the words on Card B.
- Have the whole class repeat the words after the demonstrators.

I found out this activity was very useful for my students. They were more aware of stress and ending sounds of the words they had practiced. When their friends gave presentations, they recognized the incorrect pronunciation their peers had. In addition, when they talked in front of the class, they produced fewer mistakes.

Mini-Group Rehearsal

In my two classes, there were 21 students in one and 25 students in the other. To help develop their presentation skills in

only eight weeks was not an easy task for me. Each student needed at least five minutes to rehearse before their real presentation time. Three hours per week is not enough time for all of them to practice and gain fluency and self-confidence.

My intention was to have them rehearse as many times as possible. Also, they needed to practice using their voice, eye contact, gestures, visual aids, and so on. However, in practice, students did not rehearse enough at home; only a few students had prepared and rehearsed before class time.

Procedure

- ◆ Have students sit in five groups of five. (Figure 3)
- ◆ The first students in each group stand up and give their presentations, while others in each group are the audience. One student in each group may help the presenters show the visual aids.
- ◆ When the first presenters finish their talks, everyone in the audience gives some comments about the presentation, which can be either positive or negative.
- ◆ After all members in each group finish their presentations, start rotating members.
- ◆ First, the first presenters leave their groups and go to another group on their left. They become new members or part of the audience of the neighboring group. (Figure 4)
- ◆ Next, the second presenters of each group repeat the same steps as the first ones.
- ◆ Continue doing this until every student rehearses their presentation twice and joins their original members again.
- ◆ Ask one or two representatives of each group to give their presentations to the whole class.
- ◆ After each presentation, pick some students to evaluate the speakers.

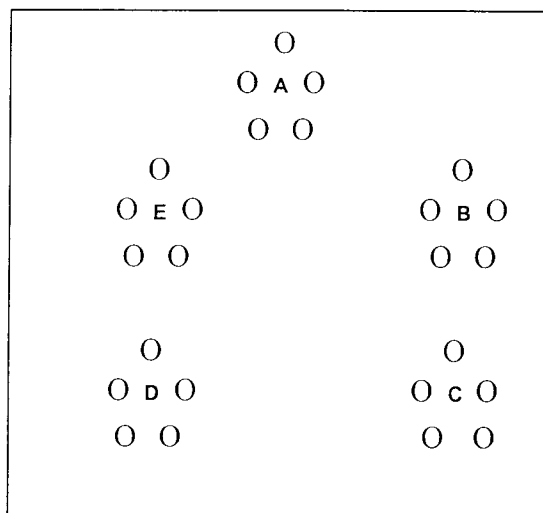


Figure 3: Mini-Group Rehearsal

This activity did help both prepared and unprepared students to be ready for the final presentation, to improve their fluency and to increase self-confidence at the same time.

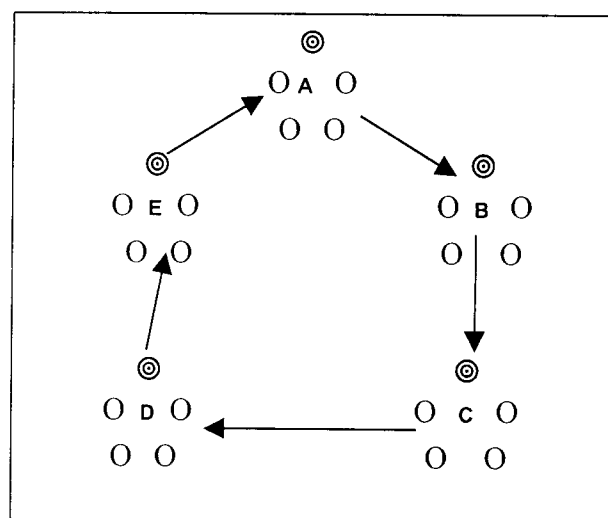


Figure 4: Group Rotation

Most importantly, they realized that they needed to rehearse before they stood up in front of the audience. They also got feedback from their audience, which they can make

use of to improve their presentations next time.

Conclusion

The activities involve cooperative interactions among students in pairs, small groups and the whole class. Most importantly, students learn to work individually. From my point of view, both activities are suitable for lower level

students. I felt they helped facilitate the development of my students' presentation skills, and I found that they gained self-confidence in their ability to speak in front of the class. The teacher with high level students may adapt both activities to suit their students. For example, instead of using guided or prepared activities like mine, they may allow students to incorporate their creativity in each activity.