

“WELCOME TO OUR SEMINAR MINICONFERENCE”: ANOTHER WAY OF PRACTICING PRESENTATION SKILLS

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Abstract

Developing students' presentation skills belongs to a syllabus of nearly every regular course of language training at universities. It has been part of the last semester of English for Lawyers at Masaryk University for more than a decade as well. To enhance the students' motivation to deliver a presentation of good quality and to increase the attention of listening students, I included presentations into a more complex activity of holding a miniconference. Within two seminars the students either presented legal topics or participated in organizing the conference. In my paper I describe and evaluate specific tasks set for the miniconference and show the students' feedback to this, hopefully, more realistic setting.

“WELCOME TO OUR SEMINAR MINICONFERENCE” ANEB STUDENTSKÉ PREZENTACE JAKO MINIKONFERENCE

Nácvik prezentačních dovedností je součástí téměř každého kurzu odborného či akademického jazyka na vysokých školách. Právnická fakulta Masarykovy univerzity není výjimkou, pro úspěšné zakončení posledního semestru Angličtiny pro právníky jsou studenti povinni přednést prezentaci odborného tématu. Pro zvýšení motivace, jak prezentujících, tak i studentů posluchačů, jsem prezentace zařadila do uceleného úkolu organizace a aktivní účasti na minikonferenci. Dva semináře tedy probíhaly formou konference, kterou studenti organizují či na ní vystupují s prezentací. Ve svém příspěvku se věnuji rozdělení jednotlivých úkolů a jejich zhodnocení z pohledu vyučujícího i zpětné vazbě ze strany studentů.

„WELCOME TO OUR SEMINAR MINICONFERENCE“ ODER STUDENTISCHE PRÄSENTATIONEN ALS MINIKONFERENZ

Zur universitären fremdsprachlichen Ausbildung gehört untrennbar das Training von Fachsprache und akademischer Sprache. Die juristische Fakultät an der Masaryk-Universität in Brunn bildet darin keine Ausnahme. Zum erfolgreichen Abschluss des letzten Semesters im Fach Englisch für Juristen gehört die Präsentation zu einem fachlichen Thema. Zur Steigerung der Motivation sowohl der Vortragenden als auch der studentischen Zuhörerschaft habe ich eine Präsentationsaufgabe in die Gesamtaufgabenstellung eingefügt, und zwar die Organisation einer Minikonferenz und die aktive Teilnahme an derselben. Zwei Seminare liefen also in Form einer Konferenz ab, welche die Studenten organisiert hatten und bei der sie selbst mit einer Präsentation auftraten. In meinem Beitrag befaße ich mich mit der Verteilung der einzelnen Aufgaben und deren Bewertung aus dem Blickwinkel des Dozenten sowie mit der Rückmeldung von Seiten der Studenten.

Introduction

Developing students' presentation skills has become a necessary part of foreign language education at universities all over the world, sometimes it is included within the courses of academic English or English for specific purposes, or it can be offered as a separate course. At the Faculty of Law of Masaryk University, it is a part of continuous assessment whose successful completion is a necessary pre-condition before taking the examination.

Evaluation students' presentation skills has become a regular practice, however, the instructions and procedure have been modified over the years. The last innovation involved incorporating presentations into a more complex task of organizing and attending a conference. After describing the common presentation methodology at the Faculty of Law and the motivation behind designing the conference activity, the paper explains the conference procedure, i.e. the division into particular stages and instructions for the tasks and subtasks, continues with evaluation of students' performance, presents feedback and concludes with suggestions for further improvements.

1 Overview of presentation practice within the course “English for Lawyers”

1.1 Description of the course

The course “English for Lawyers” is a compulsory 4-semester course for the students of the Faculty of Law, Masaryk University. It is taught in 90-minute seminars a week and there are about 18 - 20 students in a seminar group. The first three semesters are finished by a credit test, however, the students need to complete a continuous assessment during the last semester and then they can take an examination.

1.2 Common methodology on presentation skills

Practicing presentation skills has been a part of legal English syllabus at the Faculty of Law for more than ten years. The students practice their presentation skills during in-class minipresentations of the first three semesters and in the fourth semester they form groups of three and are asked to prepare a 15-minute presentation of high quality as a part of continuous assessment.

The students first enhance their presentation skills in the lessons and then work on their presentations in groups out-of-class. The presentations are usually performed within the seminars: the lesson is begun by a presentation which is then assessed by the teacher and the classmates in a written form and the rest of the seminar continues as a regular lesson.

1.3 Involving the audience

To increase the involvement of listening students, the presenters have to prepare an interactive task for the audience. It could be something traditional such a quiz and word puzzle, or something original, e.g. a piece of drama. The students can be very creative, however, they need to be trained how to work with the chosen interactive task smoothly and efficiently.

A later adjustment is posting the presentation abstracts into discussion forums and inviting comments from fellow students. Needless to say that although the majority of reactions are optimistic about the choice of topics and content of the abstracts, the students do not write only positive comments, they also express their doubts or criticism. The authors of abstracts then usually put more effort into delivering the presentation when they know about the expectation of the audience.

These additions resulted in the presentations being better prepared which corresponds to the findings of De Grez et al. (2012: 138) that the audience involvement is considered important as research has shown that “students’ perception of peer assessment will influence their willingness to take into account the feedback generated by peer assessment and to actually do something with that feedback.”

1.4 Motivation for further modifications

Even though the presentation quality has increased, some groups still did not perform well, and sometimes the students in the audience were “falling asleep”. The seminar management also did not always work well. The teacher knew that there was always the danger of the technology collapsing, the presentation part getting too long or being cancelled.

Last academic year I therefore decided to test a new methodology within which the class spend with presentations two weeks, i.e. the whole two 90-minute seminars, in the form of a miniconference. One half of the students presented their papers which meant there were three presentations in one day. The other half participated in organizing the conference. The roles were switched in the other conference week. I tested this method in seven seminar groups.

The motivation behind the conference scheme was mainly twofold: to change the management of the seminars in which both the presentations and teaching took place, and to increase the engagement of the students, both when presenting and observing. The new method also brought other positive “side effects”. The students got the feeling of a “real” conference, practiced more soft skills and many of them enjoyed the presentations much more. This goes hand in hand with what also Pulko and Parikh (2003: 244) observed: “A successful training session must begin by creating a sense of urgency and somehow capturing the interest of the audience, usually by emphasising the importance of the topic and its relevance.”

2 The miniconference procedure

The whole activity started by arranging 18 or 19 students of a seminar group into 6 presentation groups and then the groups negotiated a topic. The first set of tasks concerned abstracts. In the next step the students prepared the actual presentation and choose one of three organisation tasks. They presented their topic on one conference day and in the other day they performed their organization task.

2.1 Preparatory stage - presentation skills practice and writing abstracts

The students recalled the rules of successful presentations and practised effective work with visuals and interactive tasks in the first lessons of the semester. At the same time they learnt the rules of abstract writing and each presentation group posted the title and abstract to the discussion forum. The teacher checked if there were no overlaps, or linguistic or content problems and set an individual task: the students were supposed to read the abstracts and everybody chose three which they commented on. The authors of the abstracts could then draw on the ideas from the comments.

2.2 Preparing the presentation

The presentation groups worked on their topics out of class; they were asked to prepare the paper for the seminar miniconference according to the following instructions:

- everybody from the group is equally involved when presenting the paper,

- the presentation lasts within the time limit: 15-20 minutes for groups of three, 20-25 minutes for groups of four,
- any topic concerning law,
- the paper includes an interactive task for the audience,
- the presenters demonstrate efficient use of visuals,
- the presentation as a whole is of high quality and pleasant to follow.

2.3 Organisation tasks

The organization tasks were set as team work for the existing presenting groups. Everyone should participate in the chosen task; however, the division of labour was up to each group. The organization tasks covered the following three options, the groups signed for one in the lesson two weeks before the first conference day: Invitation & Registration, Chairing & Time-keeping, Interviewing & Reporting. The students obtained the following instructions for their particular task.

2.3.1 Invitation & Registration

This group was to prepare an invitation leaflet and to take care of the registration. They made up a text for the invitation: prepared an exact programme with time slots, the titles of the presentations and the abstracts which they found in the discussion forum. They could quote any comments from the forum to make the invitation more attractive. The length of the invitation leaflet was maximum two pages, the students were to agree on graphical design. They submitted the leaflet to the teacher two days before the conference.

At the registration, the group welcomed the participants, made sure everybody was signed against the registration list and handed over the copies with the invitation leaflets and evaluation sheets they had been given by the teacher.

2.3.2 Chairing & Time-keeping

This group had a challenging task; they were responsible for smooth running without delays. They were to create a pleasant and professional atmosphere; they were asked to carefully prepare the words for welcoming the audience, introducing the speakers and talks and closing each presentation and the whole conference as well.

As for the time keeping, the group had to decide in advance how they would clearly and politely signal the remaining time to the presenters and how they would react if a presenting group evidently got into time pressure.

2.3.3 Interviewing & Reporting

The task of this group involved interviewing members of the audience and presenters, and preparing a conference report. The aim was to collect opinions on the presentations and summarize them in the report which could be either in a written, audio or video form. The students were supposed to state factual information, evaluate the conference and use opinions of at least two persons in the report. The length was set to 200 - 400 words, or 2-3 minutes.

2.4 Conference

The teacher prepared the copies of the invitation leaflet with the programme, the list of students for registration, evaluation sheets and a little refreshment to create a more realistic

atmosphere. It was necessary to assist the organization groups at the beginning to clarify all their subtasks.

The students registered at the registration desk, were given the programme and three evaluation sheets if they were not presenting, two of them if they were presenting. The charring group opened the conference and everybody could focus on the first presentation and its evaluation.

The first two presentations were followed by a five-minute break during which the evaluation sheets were handed over directly to the speakers and the interviewing group could conduct interviews. After the last presentation, the chair closed the conference and invited everybody for a coffee break.

At the end of the second conference day, the students held a ballot to choose the best presentation out of the six they had seen. It was interesting to notice that nearly all the groups chose the presentation which included the most catchy, and thus memorable, parts, even though it was not the most professional of all.

All the reporting groups opted for a written report which they submitted a few days after the conference had been hold. All the invitation leaflets and reports were then posted on the “English for Lawyers” course websites.

3 Student performance and feedback

During the conference activity the students practiced language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), soft skills (e.g. presentation skills, team work, critical thinking, evaluating, creativity) and hard skills (gaining knowledge).

3.1 Presentations

Generally, compared to the past years, the students showed more efforts to perform well, but they were also more nervous when presenting. Some of them displayed really professional approach. I could identify the following strengths: the choice of topic, research, structuring the presentation, professional and pleasant introduction and effective visuals. Several weaknesses appeared in a number of presentations; some groups had problems with following all the instructions, keeping the attention of audience in demanding parts, translating Czech facts into English (e.g. names of acts) or incorporating an effective conclusion.

3.2 Organization tasks

The invitation leaflets were rather successful, the students could show their design and writing creativity, nevertheless, sometimes linguistic problems arose when students wanted to translate Czech metaphorical phrases into English word by word. The registration procedure became a pleasant and enjoyable beginning of a seminar conference.

The majority of charring groups really prepared very well, which contributed to the pleasant atmosphere. They were also strict time-keepers, and thus none of the seminar groups were kept overtime.

The reports provided valuable feedback and the overall impression from them was mainly positive. Some groups submitted very well-written reports with many interesting insights; some groups reported only on factual information and quoted two or three opinions as stated in the instructions.

Most of the reporting groups were able to identify both good and bad points in the presentations. Let me quote two examples. The first one shows how the students were able to

cope with a presentation of bad quality: "... the presentation focused on the differences between federal and national law. But as for me as an audience I must say that they failed miserably. Their presentation was really bad. They got way too much text on each slide and they were reading the whole thing from papers. I was really disappointed with this presentation, because they picked up a great topic...". The majority of reports were really enthusiastic and showed a good deal of appreciation of all the work involved as in the second sample: "We want to thank all the presenters that they spend their time to prepare such amazing and interesting presentations and we also want to thank all the organizers who took care of timekeeping, chairing and registration. It was a very successful event and may the gained experience and information be useful for all of you!"

4 Suggestions for further improvements

Even though the activity can be considered as useful and successful, there is a number of issues which could be improved in the future. The most important are two: balancing the load of work involved in the three organization tasks and eliminating the handicap of the first day presenters.

As far as the organization tasks are concerned, although each task appeals to a different type of student, e.g. shy students who do not like standing in front of audience would not opt for chairing, the reporting task obviously takes more time and effort than the other tasks. The balance could be achieved by adding another task to end the whole activity – writing a short self-reflection on practicing presentation skills. The minimum word limit for this task could be then scaled according to the organization task, i.e. the reporting group will be set the shortest self-reflexion.

By including self-reflection we also make the whole presentation skills practice more valuable as self-reflection should be a necessary part of developing any skills. It will help students analyse their own behaviour and result in improved presentation performance as described in De Grez et al. (2012: 131).

As for the other issue to improve in the activity, if we compare the performance of the students on the first and second conference day, the latter were more relaxed because they already knew what to expect and what to pay attention to. This fact was also commented by reporters, e.g. „I thought this second day of our mini-conference had been even better than the first one,‘ said one member of audience. We can only agree. Presenting groups knew from the first day that the worst enemy is time...” A possible way of solving this disadvantage is to provide clear instructions with examples of outcomes before the conference.

Conclusion

The paper described a complex task-based activity of attending and organizing a conference in which students write an abstract, comment on abstracts of other groups, prepare a group presentation, deliver the presentation, evaluate the other presentations and participate in the organization of the seminar miniconference. The activity was tested with students of English for Lawyers, nevertheless, it can be adapted to various settings of both academic language or language for specific purposes.

The complex activity of miniconference proved to be beneficial for many reasons. It enhances the students' motivation to perform well; the students gain deeper practice of soft skills and develop their language skills in a more authentic setting. Also, more and more students realize that good presentation skills will be useful for the future. It is, however, advisable to introduce the reasons and future outcomes of the activity in a clear and comprehensive way at the very beginning. It became evident that many students were slightly scared of the tasks, even

though they showed very good results later. As one of the reports mentioned: “In the end we can say that that the miniconference was not a bad idea after all. We learned how to present our ideas in front of audience and improved our skills. Furthermore, we were introduced to very interesting topics.”

Literature

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