

Developing Speaking Skills In Academic Contexts

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SETTING THE CONTEXT

Since I joined The University of Queensland six years ago, I have seen marked growth in our EAP programs. This increase has been accompanied by developments in our EAP curriculum design as we aim to provide appropriate preparation, in terms of both linguistic and study skills, for the demands our EAP students go on to face in a range of mainstream study programs. We maintain informal contact with many of our ex-students; in fact, recently a group of these students led an in-service session for our teaching staff. At this meeting, they provided us with much valuable information on the problems they were having with the reading and writing requirements of their courses. But it was what they had to say about the apparently hidden rules and expected standards of spoken communication that added to my interest in looking further at the issue of academic talk. This paper is an attempt to explore and clarify what is involved in the learning of academic talk.

WHAT IS ACADEMIC TALK?

It is interesting to see how our coursebooks identify the requisite skills for being able to function in academic contexts. In *Speaking in Academic Settings* (one of the Studying in Australia series) McEvedy et al (1986) list two sets of objectives:

Instrumental learning objectives

The specific learning objectives ... are:

- to show students how to plan and research material for a formal presentation;
- to have students prepare appropriate written and oral versions of the same material;
- to show students how to rehearse a talk by taping it;
- to teach students how to prepare and use appropriate visual aids;
- to explain to students the other types of preparation necessary for taking part in seminars, tutorials and supervisions.

Acculturation objectives

Students need to be made aware of the roles they are expected to play when speaking in an academic setting ... further aims...:

- to discuss the roles played by the leader and other participants in seminars and tutorials;
- to make plain the role research students are expected to adopt when interacting with their supervisors.

From these two lists, it is evident that the primary focus is on **study** skills: mention is made of **planning** material, **researching** material and using visual aids. Where speaking skills are mentioned, the focus appears to be on the lead-up stages to speaking and discussion of the skills being practised by other participants, rather than actual speaking skills practice.

Matthews, in defining the purpose for *Speaking Solutions* (1994) specifically mentions the development of oral communication skills. She states that her book helps students:

- participate successfully in conversations and small group discussions;
- plan, organise and deliver effective presentations by following clear specific guidelines;
- improve listening and pronunciation skills ...;
- strengthen critical thinking skills ...;
- analyse the effectiveness of discussions and presentations ...;
- gain sensitivity to basic cross-cultural issues
- take responsibility for their own learning

This list appears to be centred more firmly on practising particular skills in academic talk and not the preparation or the supporting aids for it. Specific speaking skills are described in three of the seven objectives, and it is interesting to note that even conversation gets a mention. The inclusion of critical thinking skills and analysis of effective performance show a concern for the ability to evaluate and refine one's own performance.

What helped me the most in finding a useful defining framework was Kutz and Salzmann's 1995 paper *A Model for Academic Speaking Practice*. They stated that the overall objective of their EAP program was to :

- communicate information logically
- with consideration of the audience.

I felt that this accurately summed up what I thought I was aiming for in my EAP speaking classes, and it also reflected some of the concerns expressed by our former students at the in-service.

I would like to take a moment to consider how students perceive what is involved in this logical communication of information. When asked to identify three specific speaking skills needed to participate successfully in their studies after EAP, my class came up with the following items:

- clear pronunciation (including stress and intonation);
- not to hesitate;
- express myself clearly and give examples;
- build up vocabulary for academic purposes;
- study many useful expressions by myself;
- how to evaluate/in some way I have to monitor myself;
- speak loudly/slowly/more/confidently;
- converse fluently/daily discourse;
- express using simple sentences;
- eye contact.

The need for concrete items – such as academic vocabulary and useful expressions – is clearly evident here. This could reflect recognition of a new set of conventions which appear to be operating in academic settings. Morley sums this up rather effectively:

Many of these students, while they may very well be able to survive linguistically in the university, are seriously disadvantaged as far as their chances to "succeed" in the milieu of sophisticated language demands required

3.

of fully participating members of their academic/professional community ...
(Morley, 1993:243)

And it is those "sophisticated language demands", encompassing what **we** deem to be logical communication of information, which form the basis of the activities described in the remainder of this paper.

APPROACHES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC SPEAKING SKILLS

(1) SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS

One coursebook begins its introduction to the student: "Why is it that people fear public speaking more than death? Perhaps, like death, we are never really sure what will happen when the time comes" (Cummings, 1992). My students echoed this perspective in their identification of this task as the most stressful and least enjoyable aspect of their speaking assessment. We have made various attempts to reduce this stress, including the use of impromptu speeches in the lead up stages to a seminar presentation. These short speeches are initially given to small groups in the class, then we build up to speaking in front of the whole class, usually with the speaker standing behind the lectern – more for physical support than formalising the activity! Topic ideas for impromptu speeches include:

- If you could choose to live in any era in history what era would it be?
- Describe an event that is currently in the news. Why is it important?
- What is the role of the mass media in your country?
- What is something you have always wanted to do, but have not been able to do yet?
- Explain what you feel are the responsibilities of grown children toward parents.
- Which professions have a high status in your country? Do you agree with their high status? Are there other professions that should have higher status?
- What does the world need more of?

(from Brown and Smith, 1995)

We have tried numerous approaches to the seminar presentation. A recent one we have used looks like this:

- (i) Choose an interesting topic and present your ideas on this to the class.
(Maximum time: 15 minutes)
- (ii) Break the class into groups of your choice and direct group discussion around three to five questions relating to your presentation. These questions must be prepared beforehand and should stimulate discussion.
(Time: 10-15 minutes)
- (iii) Evaluation will be on the basis of:
 - delivery
 - content
 - organisation

The discussion phase has proved to be particularly valuable in that the presenters can see immediately how their audience has responded to the presentation. It is worth mentioning group presentations here – these have worked well in the past. In this kind of arrangement students work together to research a particular topic (for example: immigration patterns in Australia, Australian student perspectives on international issues, the presentation and content of news programs). After carrying out their research, they collate their material and then, as a team, report their findings to the class. For some students, standing up as part of a team to speak in front of one's peers is less stressful.

Preparing for a seminar presentation

The steps described below outline some of the major areas we cover in the classes leading up to individual seminar presentations. There is some overlap between the activities described here and what happens around the small group discussions, which are briefly described later in this paper.

(a) Viewing videos

An integral part of introductory lessons is viewing videos of past successful presentations and also commercially produced videos showing how to present successfully. We concentrate here on the use of models, analysing the effectiveness of successful performance and thereby make the expectations dictated by both the task and the context explicit.

(b) Selection and organisation of content

A presentation matrix from *Listen, Speak, Present* is used to map out the presentation content. The completed matrix is then used as the basis for pair and small group discussions where participants are encouraged to talk in some detail through the anticipated structure of their presentations. It is interesting to see the usefulness of the suggestions offered and the ways in which the students approach making the necessary amendments. The 'finalised' outlines are then handed in to me for discussion and any further refinement.

(c) Delivery

We spend a lot of time focussing on the importance of having an introduction to the presentation which is well-structured and attracts the attention of the audience. We make time for a couple of practice runs which are video-recorded and used for one-to-one feedback. In previous groups, we have been able to video-record a complete practice presentation, which for the majority of students proved to be very worthwhile. However, for one student, his practice presentation was his best effort – because there was no pressure on him to do really well! Making video recordings of practice conclusions presents an interesting dilemma – students say they are not keen to divulge their punchlines or "lose my thunder"!

The value of using visual aids to illustrate a presentation is also covered in the preparation stages. Some students approach the use of visual aids with enthusiasm and creativity, some producing elaborately masked OHTs which they gradually unveil in great style. A few weeks ago, a Japanese student gave his presentation on the effects of the Sarin gas attacks in Tokyo. He succeeded in making all of us feel suspicious about a can of Coke and a collection of day-packs he had carefully arranged around the lectern.

Another major focus of the practice stages is developing familiarity with specific expressions to make transitions from one section or topic to another, to signal conclusions and to deal with questions from the audience. Samples of these are shown in Box 1 below. Students tend to respond very positively to this area of work, perhaps because it is tangible, relatively easy to implement, and they can see the positive impact of using such structures.

Box 1



DEVELOPING A CONCLUSION

Signaling the Conclusion

In conclusion,)
)
 summary,)

To summarize ,)
)
 conclude,)

Before I end, let me say

Asking for Questions

Do you have any questions or comments?
 I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sample Conclusions

In conclusion, then, the consequences of television that I've mentioned are just too harmful to ignore. Teenagers need to get away from television and out into the real world. Instead of sitting in front of a black box, they should be meeting people, playing sports, doing homework, and developing their talents. Thank you. Do you have any questions or comments?

Before I end, let me summarize the main points I've mentioned. The next time you're getting ready to travel overseas, just remember – food, drink, activity, and light. By following the suggestions I've given you regarding these four factors, you should be able to avoid jet lag completely. Thank you. I'll be happy to answer any questions you have.

(Matthews, 1994:139)

(d) Familiarity with evaluation criteria

Throughout our preparation lessons we make frequent reference to the evaluation criteria which will be used in assessing the presentations. In Brown and Smith's paper "Peer feedback on student speeches" (the subtitle was "If you were a rice ball, you would be delicious!"), two versions of student generated criteria are included. An example is included in Box 2 below. It is important that students become familiar with the language used to comment accurately on specific aspects of their performance.

Box 2

PEER FEEDBACK FORM					
5 = Excellent					
4 = Very good					
3 = Satisfactory					
2 = Poor					
1 = Unsatisfactory					
	Name:				
	Speech:				
Categories					
The Speech					
Content	1	2	3	4	5
Organisation	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5
Time (length of speech)	1	2	3	4	5
Comments:					
Body Language					
Eye contact	1	2	3	4	5
Gestures	1	2	3	4	5
Stance	1	2	3	4	5
Comments:					
Oral Expression					
Fluency	1	2	3	4	5
Intonation	1	2	3	4	5
Pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5
Speed (rate of speaking)	1	2	3	4	5
Voice	1	2	3	4	5
Comments:					
Support Materials (equipment)	1	2	3	4	5

(from Brown & Smith, 1995)

Another approach to peer evaluation is to have members of the audience write (anonymously) a brief comment expressing a positive comment followed by constructive criticism, which is then passed to the speaker. This can work well if learners are able to use 'feedback language' effectively and if they feel they can be honest.

(e) More video viewing

Each presentation is video-recorded, and students view these recordings by themselves before they meet with me to discuss their performance. I have been very impressed by the overall attention to detail and sophistication and accuracy of their analysis. In many cases, they show themselves to be accurate and effective interpreters of the evaluation criteria.

In the approach to seminar presentations I have described, I hope you can see that there is an ongoing process of questioning and analysis. Opportunities are provided to gauge audience response to both **what** is communicated and **how** is it communicated.

(2) SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

As was the case for seminar presentations, a weekly lesson is devoted to small group discussions. Learners feel much more positive about this aspect of their performance, and the reasons they give for feeling more confident in a small group setting include:

- I feel it's easy to jump up to the conversation.
- People tend to take turns (in whole class it's almost out of order).
- I'm nervous in front of a large group.
- It's easy to interact.
- There's more chance to speak.
- I have time to protect my opinion.
- I don't need to care about my speaking grammar.

Topics used as input for the discussions are drawn from other areas of the course including lectures, reading materials or AV programs. Textbook tasks are also used, and an example is provided in Box 3 below.

Box 3**CASE 1: SELECTING SPEAKING ACTIVITIES****Situation**

An American multinational company employs many professionals in the fields of science and engineering who do not speak English as their native language. Company officials have asked the training department to organize a course in oral communication skills in English for these professionals. The training department has asked a group of these employees to draw up a list of the kinds of speaking situations in which they need the most practice. The training department can then develop a course relevant to the needs of these employees.

The most useful speaking skills to include in the course are:

- ___ 1. formal speeches to large audiences
- ___ 2. oral presentations with visual aids
- ___ 3. telephone conversation skills
- ___ 4. group discussions with nontechnical personnel
- ___ 5. one-to-one talks with experts
- ___ 6. social/conversation skills
- ___ 7. one-to-one talks with nontechnical personnel
- ___ 8. group discussions with technical personnel
- ___ 9. informal presentations to a few people
- ___ 10. job interview skills
- ___ 11. _____
- ___ 12. _____

(Matthews & Marino, 1990:125)

Specific gambits for such functions as giving an opinion, rejecting a suggestion, asking for clarification and expressing possibility are covered in both lead-up and follow-up activities. In the latter case, students then have an opportunity to 'replay' their discussion, so that they may incorporate these gambits in an effort to carry out the task more effectively.

A number of group discussions are either video or audio-recorded throughout the session, so that focussed feedback can be provided on performance. Again, students are familiar with evaluation criteria, and a format we have used is included in Box 4 below.

Box 4***Discussion Evaluation******PARTICIPATION EVALUATION FORM*****1. *Identifying the group***

A. Discussion topic: _____

B. Names of other students in your group: _____

2. *Rating your own discussion.* Use the following scales to rate your own discussion group:A. *Participation.* Did all group members interact and take equal part in the discussion?

Excellent	Satisfactory	Weak	Unsatisfactory
3	2	1	0

B. *Clarity.* Did all of the group members speak loudly and clearly?

Excellent	Satisfactory	Weak	Unsatisfactory
3	2	1	0

C. *Pace.* Did the discussion move along at the right speed, without long pauses between speakers?

Excellent	Satisfactory	Weak	Unsatisfactory
3	2	1	0

D. *Leader Control.* Did the leader effectively guide the discussion, not taking too much or too little control?

Excellent	Satisfactory	Weak	Unsatisfactory
3	2	1	0

3. *Making Suggestions.* What suggestions can you make to improve your next group discussion?

Students have been quick to point out how their performance in a group is strongly influenced by the performance of the other group members (referred to as 'the interlocutor effect' in the literature). We try to work on strategies for coping with unexpected responses, staying on track and making the most of what is provided by a particular group. These skills become especially important to the student who is looked to as the 'group leader'.

(3) PRONUNCIATION

One of the most frequently expressed requests at this level is for more work on pronunciation – and some of the more frequently borrowed materials from the library are those we use in our language laboratory sessions.

There is a weekly language lab component included in the oral skills development classes in the EAP program. At the beginning of the course, the students complete a pronunciation profile – this involves recording on to audio-cassette the reading aloud of three short paragraphs and responses to three general questions. Before handing this in, the student listens to the recording, and gives a self-rating. The teacher can then base individually tailored follow-up tasks on what has been achieved in this first tape. The use of these tapes outside class is popular and very effective – in a recent course 70% of the class produced tapes for review on a regular basis. The material in *Well Said* provides excellent focussed practice activities, which are designed for use both in class and on a self-access basis.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Students entering EAP programs at The University of Queensland need to have a minimum IELTS score, and for the Speaking sub-test this usually ranges from band 5 to band 7. These students, to use Morley's description, have linguistic **survival** skills, but I think it is our job as EAP language instructors, to prepare them for the **sophisticated** language demands they will soon be experiencing. The approaches to two aspects of 'academic talk' described in this paper represent an attempt to prepare these students for what we currently know of these demands. With ongoing dialogue between TESOL centres and university departments, and continued contact with our past students, we can continue to ensure that in our EAP programs we:

- identify and develop specific skills in 'academic talk';
- provide a range of relevant practice opportunities;
- maintain a focus on accuracy of expression;
- give meaningful and usable feedback;
- encourage ongoing self-monitoring and analysis of native speaker norms.

REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED MATERIALS

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