

ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS ON SPECIALITY AT THE BEGINNING LEVEL.
PREPARATION AND DELIVERY



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Abstract. The course “English for biologists” has been designed and developed for the students of the Department of Natural Sciences of Novosibirsk State University. The course consists of four stages. It is intended to form some specific language skills: giving and receiving oral academic presentations. The paper deals with the formation of general and specific language skills at the first stage of the course. At this stage the students learn how to give an oral academic presentation on their speciality in front of the audience. They also learn how to be active participants of the audience during the presentation. The author considers what language skills are developed and how they interrelate and interact with each other in the teaching / learning process. The texts from the book *Right Reading* are taken as the material for presentations. As a result students obtain their first experience in giving and receiving oral academic presentations on biology.

Key Words and Phrases: language learning, academic presentations, specific language skills, nonlanguage students

I. Introduction

English as a foreign language is taught at many higher institutions in Russia. If students

study foreign languages in order to make them their future speciality, they are language students. Otherwise they are called nonlanguage students.

The primary goal of studying foreign languages at nonlanguage higher institutions is acquiring enough knowledge for the practical use of the language. It means a good command of language skills both receptive (reading, listening) and productive (speaking, writing).

Today, the students who study a foreign language are considered successful if they can communicate effectively in their foreign language. So, the teaching of the speaking skill has become very important.

To reach the above-mentioned goal we should organise the teaching/learning process in such a way that all the four skills would interrelate and interact in it. Then mastering one of the language skills would also favour mastering the others at the same time.

II. Goals

I teach English at the Department of Natural Sciences (DNS) of Novosibirsk State University (NSU). My students are biologists. They are mostly low-intermediate and intermediate students. Their course of English starts in the third semester at the NSU and finishes in the sixth semester. That is the course lasts four semesters.

In addition to the general course of English I have designed and developed a special course “English for biologists”. It allows not only to review the skills in general English but also to form specific skills in English for Academic Purposes. Some of the skills are academic listening (listening to lectures and other academic presentations), giving oral academic presentations (lectures, reports), etc. The given course is intended to form these specific skills. It consists of four stages and is meant to be taught during all the four semesters.

The aim of the activity of giving and receiving oral academic presentations is to develop a pattern of language interaction within the classroom, which is as close as possible to that used by competent performers in normal life.

III. Materials

It is psychologically hard for the NSU students who only study English for two years (four academic hours a week) to speak on scientific topics. That is why for the first series of “academic” presentations I take the book *Right Reading* by Dean Curry. There are more than

thirty texts in it each accompanied by a set of exercises. The texts are short (450–600 signs), easy to read and understand and related to biology (Curry, s.a.). The book is intended for the beginning level students and is normally used in the course of preparation for the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) exam.

The texts outline such topics as the pollution of air (text *Air Pollution* (see Fig. 1)), the conservation of the ancient forests (text *What is a Sequoia?*), the survival of species in the process of natural selection (text *Colors in Nature*), etc.

Figure 1. Text of Chapter 27 «Air Pollution» from the book «Right Reading».

What is air pollution? It is dirt in the air. This is a big problem in some parts of the world.

What causes air pollution? People cause it by burning fuel in buses, cars, factories, homes, schools, and trains. The smoke from burning fuel has poison gases and dust. These enter the air and make it dirty.

Why is air pollution bad? The dirty air hurts people. It helps to cause more colds, coughs, and diseases of the heart and lungs. It also hurts plants and animals and makes clothing and buildings dirty.

Above the text there are two pictures: “Air pollution or “smog” in New York City” and “Air pollution in Saint Louis, Missouri”.

There are five or six exercises in each chapter and a glossary. The following four types of exercises can be found in all the chapters of the book «Right Reading»: 1) *Exercise A. Check the true facts from the reading;* 2) *Exercise B. What’s missing? Find the missing verbs (nouns, adjectives, etc) in the reading;* 3) *Exercise C. Paragraph one (two, three, etc) says;* 4) *Exercise D. Circle the answer* (see Fig. 2. and Appendix A).

Figure 2. The exercises from Chapter 27 “Air Pollution” (partly).

B. What’s missing? Find the missing nouns in the reading.

1. _____ cause it by burning fuel.

2. The _____ from burning fuel

C. Paragraph two says:

___1. People cause air pollution.

___2. Animals like air pollution.

___3. Burning fuel comes from dirty clothing.

E. Circle the answer.

1. Dirt in the air is called (a) disease (b) pollution (c) gases.

2. Burning fuel comes from (a) dust (b) coughs (c) cars.

Thus, teaching is not based upon the complicated texts of scientific papers, but it is based upon much simpler materials, which are still related to the students' speciality. We can create different kinds of language skills both receptive and productive using these materials.

IV. Experience

Right Reading is used for presentations at the first stage of the course "English for biologists" during the first semester. It happens as far as intermediate or low-intermediate students are concerned. If the students are beginners, they start the special course in the second semester or even later. The first stage consists of several parts.

1. Creating reading and listening skills

The whole class works on the first four chapters of the book. Their topics are bound up with each other. The general topic is *The Four Seasons*. The four chapters are called *Springtime, Summer Days, Autumn, Winter.*). Students get to know the structure of the chapter and the types of exercises (all the chapters have similar structures, the exercises are of the same type).

Some *Reading Skills for Academic Purposes* are formed here. They are:

- perception of simple words and phrases
- recognition of clues which signal phrases
- skimming for the main idea(s)
- scanning for specific information
- reading in meaningful units (Nunan, 1992).

To fulfil *exercise A. Check the true facts from the reading* students are supposed to scan the text for the specific information that helps them to find out, which facts are true and which are not. They should do the same while dealing with *exercise B. What's missing? Find the missing nouns (verbs, adjectives, etc.) in the reading.* In *exercise C. Paragraph one (two, three, etc.) says* the students have to skim paragraphs for the main idea. To do *exercise D. Circle the answer* the students use their skills in scanning and reading in meaningful units. They also have to develop their perception of simple words and phrases, and they have to recognise when the phrase starts, when it finishes, etc.

Texts are always read aloud. Reading aloud is absolutely necessary as it is one of the

components of the process of developing listening and speaking skills in students. Reading aloud is a kind of passive speaking especially in those learners who listen to themselves when reading [Solovova, 2005]. While reading the texts aloud the students should try to keep the right intonation. For instance, in a Yes-No question the tune is rising, in a positive sentence it is falling, etc. The students should be taught that the phrasal stress in sentences is very important and that the words the sentence cannot do without are the first to be stressed.

The meanings of all the words that might be unknown to the students should be explained from the very outset.

2. Giving an academic presentation

Academic presentations are given during the second part of the first stage of the course. Every student chooses one of the chapters from the book *Right Reading* and prepares a presentation making use of all the materials the chapter includes - the text, the exercises, the glossary - but basing mainly on the text. All the students in class should give at least one presentation a semester.

Students learn how to make academic presentations using simplified texts on problems related to their speciality. The texts are ready for use. They are intended to be used for teaching but not in real life. Thus, the form and contents of students' presentations are not independent yet. But the presentations are the first step in their way to fully independent presentations and statements that the students will learn to create eventually in order to meet their own needs of intercourse.

The techniques of preparing and delivering presentations are thoroughly elaborated. A set of detailed instructions for speakers has been developed by the author. It is called '*Manual for speakers. Academic Presentations. 1st and 2nd Stages*'. A number of conversational gambits are studied, which can be useful in the course of an academic presentation. For example, such opening phrases as "Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining me today. I'm Marina Birjukova from the Department of Natural Sciences of Novosibirsk State University."

The academic presentation is usually conducted in the following way:

A. The speaker (the student giving the presentation) writes down on the blackboard all the words, which he / she considers being unknown to the audience, i.e. to his / her classmates who

are going to listen to his / her presentation. Every word has to be followed by the transcription. Russian equivalents of English words are given orally. The listeners pronounce all the words and write them down in their notebooks. They should know how to pronounce all the new words they are about to hear in the presentation. It is known that only the words, which were produced, can be recognised and comprehended when they are offered for listening. The listeners “decode” the sounds being the plane of expression of semantic units. This “decoding” is connected directly with the pronunciation of materials proposed for listening comprehension. The materials - words, sentences, etc. - are pronounced aloud or to oneself (Kuleshov, Dolinskaya, & Kitkova, 1987).

B. Having presented all the necessary words and expressions the speaker writes two or three questions on the blackboard. The listeners are supposed to answer the questions after they have listened to the presentation. The questions should not be just Yes–No questions, but they should be special questions, i. e. the questions that demand detailed answers and not just «yes» or «no». The questions are also said aloud and written down in the notebooks. For example, Fig. 3 shows the questions to Chapter 27 made up by Dmitry N. who gave the presentation on the text «Air pollution».

Figure 3. Questions to the text «Air pollution».

- 1) *What is air pollution?*
- 2) *How do people cause it?*
- 3) *How does the dirty air hurt people?*

C. Then the academic presentation itself is given. At this stage it is not independent in its form and content yet. The text of the chapter should be rendered in the most precise way. This can help students approach slightly the final aim - their ability to make up independent oral presentations on speciality.

It seems highly probable that the student preparing the presentation will try to learn the text by heart basing upon mechanical memory. This being the case, the formation of oral communication skills may slow down. To prevent that we advise the students to use various kinds of auxiliaries. The speaker is allowed to:

- translate the English text into Russian and use the translated version while reproducing the text in English in front of the audience
- make up a plan of the English text consisting of short sentences in English or in Russian

and use it during the presentation

- make up a list of key words which identify the topic and use it during the presentation
- use the picture accompanying the text as a helpful means of rendering the text.

Thus, both oral and visual means are used when the speaker presents the text basing on the picture, which does not contain any language material in itself but represents it by association of ideas. Our hope is that by using such auxiliaries we will be able to avoid forming false oral communication skills.

D. Having listened to the presentation students answer the questions suggested by the speaker. To develop oral comprehension skills it is quite necessary to form conversational listening skills, i.e. to learn how to recognise and comprehend oral reports. In our case a short oral report is given. If the students answer the questions properly and in full sentences, we can conclude that they have comprehended the report well. Information is interpreted and retained in the students' memory selectively basing mainly upon the key words marked out by the speaker and understood by the listeners (Dubin, Eskey, & Grabe, 1986).

E. Finally, all the students receive the sets of exercises to the text. They accomplish the first exercise (*ex. A. Check the true facts from the reading*) on the basis of the information they received from the oral report only. Then they get the texts of the chapter as well. To accomplish *ex. B. What's missing? Find the missing verbs (nouns, adjectives, etc.)* and *ex. D. Circle the answer* they have to scan the text for specific information. And for the *ex. C. Paragraph one (two, three, etc.) says* they are to skim the text for the main idea.

The student who gave the presentation acts as an expert here and decides if the class has accomplished the exercises correctly.

3. Speaking and listening as two sides of the same process

The speaker and the audience interact quite closely here. The process of interaction includes both the receptive skill of listening and the productive skill of speaking.

It is known that *Listening Comprehension Skills* comprise *Conversational Listening* and *Academic Listening*. In our situation of academic presentation students are expected to develop the ability to:

- retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods

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- discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the English language
- distinguish word boundaries
- recognise typical word order patterns in English.

That is the case as far as *Conversational Listening* is concerned. Students also start developing some new listening skills - *Academic Listening* in the course of an academic presentation. These new skills involve the ability to:

- identify the purpose and scope of a lecture
- identify the topic of a lecture and follow the topic development
- recognise the key lexical items relating to the topic.

Speaking skills develop in the same way as oral communication skills and in their development they pass the same stages. They also use the same supply of facilities the first of them employing the means of the sound execution of the utterance and the second one employing the means of the acoustic analysis.

Some special *Speaking Skills for Academic Purposes* are formed in this situation. Students learn how to:

- articulate phonological features of the English language comprehensibly
- master the stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns
- take short speaking turns.

4. Acquiring some writing skills

Both speaking and writing are productive skills. Acquiring one of them is tightly connected with acquiring another. On the other hand both of them are related to the receptive skills of listening and reading that provide the materials for speaking and writing. In our situation of academic presentation students develop some skills of academic writing. They try to:

- master and obey conventions of spelling and punctuation
- use grammatical system to convey one's intended meaning (e. g. ask a proper question).

At this stage the primary attention is given to the mechanics of a basic sentence. The students are to remember that each new sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a period if it is a positive sentence or with a question mark if it is a question, etc. A lot of effort is to be made to attain students to put appropriate punctuation marks at the ends of the

sentences. Leaving out of account common carelessness we can explain it in the following way. The students seem to try to make up grammatically correct sentences, i.e. use the correct word order, put articles where they are needed, use proper prepositions, etc. Having fulfilled such complicated work students often forget about the punctuation marks, which appear to be so unimportant as compared with what they have already done.

The reporter should make up correct questions. The students who listen to the presentation learn to understand if the questions have been formed properly. If the question is wrong, the reporter is to correct it. If he/she experiences some difficulties, the mistakes are corrected with the help of the other students in the class. The teacher directs the process. The result should be proper questions and everyone is to be aware of that.

The reporter has to spell all the words correctly and provide appropriate transcriptions for them. For example, if there is the word “increase” in the text, he / she has to discriminate whether it is a noun or a verb. In the case of a noun he / she supplies the transcription with the stress on the first syllable. In the case of a verb he / she supplies another transcription - with the stress on the second syllable.

The students learn to recognise parts of speech using the context as well as their knowledge of the word order in English and their knowledge of its grammatical structure. The words should be presented in their stem forms. This activity is also controlled by the teacher.

V. Conclusion

Thus, during the first stage of the course the students are able to participate in the activity of giving and receiving oral academic presentations on the topics related to biology. In order to do this they use the texts from the book *Right Reading*, which are easy to read and understand, but not the complicated texts of scientific papers yet. The presentations happen in the habitual environment of their own class in the atmosphere of benevolence, mutual aid and mutual understanding.

The students develop both receptive and productive language skills in the process of interaction between the speaker and the audience. All the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) interrelate and interact very closely here, one of them helps to form the others and vice versa.

The presentations are popular with the students. They are contented, as they understand that this activity has a context of meaning in it and trains them for their future jobs. This feeling helps them cope with all the assignments that they are supposed to fulfil and get appreciable results.

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