

## **Incorporating a Public Speaking component in an EFL university course**

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### **Introduction**

This paper attempts to present the different objectives and aims for which the course of Public Speaking (PS) has to be incorporated at the university level in the light of the new Directions in Teaching/Learning English for Academic and Professional Purposes. Specifically, it intends a) to clarify the meaning of PS and b) to outline the underlying assumptions behind incorporating it in the new program. Put simply, it attempts to describe how this course is effectively useful and relevant to the students' personal, academic and prospective professional lives.

The choice of this presentation stems from my personal experience as a teacher of this course when I once asked my students to give a five minute-one-point speech and how they expressed their reluctance to take part. However, after a basic introduction to the subject, they realized how relevant it is by virtue of the many perceived benefits they started to gain from it. Given the fact that the classical system of education over the past years has been characterized by many deficiencies due to its intangible results, the Ministry of Higher Education sought to bring about changes in the education system that would meet the requirements of the job market.

Employers and career counselors usually put good communication skills at the top of the qualities and skills they seek in people. The reason is obvious: Each year, our economy has become more dependent on information and the ability to communicate it (Zarefsky, 2002:3).

## Background to Public Speaking (PS)

Before discussing the aims and objectives for which this course was designed, it is deemed relevant to clarify the concept of PS. A quick look at the literature on PS reveals that it is almost as ancient as speech itself. The first **textbook** on the subject was written over 2400 years ago, and the principles elaborated within it were drawn from the practices and experiences of **orators in ancient Greece**. These basic principles have undergone modification as societies and cultures have changed, yet remained surprisingly uniform.

DeVito (2006) has suggested that the best way to define PS is to compare it to a form of communication we use daily which is conversation. The comparison between the two resides in purpose, audience, feedback, supporting materials, organization, language and delivery. During conversation, the role of the speaker shifts repeatedly from one person to another.

In PS, a speaker addresses a relatively large audience with a relatively continuous discourse (this does not mean that only the speaker communicates). Usually, it takes place in a face-to-face situation. PS is illustrated by the fact that most speeches are planned and rehearsed well in advance of delivery. It is more formal than conversation. Simply put, PS is the act, art, or process of making effective speeches before an audience. It is **speaking** to a group of people in a structured, deliberate manner. It is a form of **communication** that adds to the knowledge and wisdom of listeners, or that influences their attitudes or **behavior**. Additionally, a public speaker is a person who delivers a speech or oration. He is sometimes referred to as **orator, speechmaker, rhetorician, speechifier**. In public speaking, as in any form of communication, there are five basic elements, often expressed as "who is saying what to whom utilizing what medium with what effects?" (to inform, to entertain or to persuade). (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2004).

## PS and Personal Development and Benefits

A PS course is meant to provide students with training in a variety of personal competencies such as developing a more effective communicative style which gives them personal satisfaction, especially when they give quality speeches.

It is also meant to enhance their self-concept and self-esteem\*. Undeniably, the student gets a wonderful feeling to stand before the group and present a well organized speech that their colleagues appreciate. The speakers' self-esteem is heightened when they can present themselves to each other with confidence and self assurance. PS, therefore, gives them greater confidence and an upper hand that less skilled communicators lack. It motivates them to succeed and develop poise /self-assurance as speakers. Students can learn how to become more comfortable in speaking before a group and to learn how to use their voice effectively and how to control distracting mannerisms. They become aware of the many factors that may affect the speech, such as distracters, in which case the focused attention may be shifted and therefore will affect both the speaker and the audience alike.

Similarly, PS was designed to refine their communication abilities, increase their public speaking abilities and develop good communication skills by helping them improve competencies, such as adjusting messages to specific listeners and responding to feedback. It has also to help students be articulate in speech, which is one of the most civilized forms of communication, and to use that gift and skill wisely and humanely.

When you ask students if they dislike making speeches and if they ever experienced speech anxiety before an audience, their answer is yes, and this is not surprising. It has been shown that many people do not enjoy making speeches and many dislike and even fear them (Hamilton, 1996). This **glossophobia** or fear of public speaking, is believed to be the single most common **phobia**, affecting as many as 75% of people.

Given the fact that speech anxiety can profoundly affect much or all of a student's oral communication and self-esteem, PS was designed to reduce fear of communicating and overcome speech anxiety. To this end, Suid (1984) suggests activities to overcome speech anxiety and improve presentation skills. These include informally questioning students on topics about which they are knowledgeable, reading speech transcripts and listening to master speakers, playing charades, presenting speeches without eye contact, and illustrating a speech.

Friedman (1980) has also suggested a number of characteristics of a healthy classroom that can prevent reticence and/or reduce communication apprehension. These include:

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\* **Self-esteem** is a feeling of self-worth that an individual possesses. It can occur at 3 levels: Highest level: global self-esteem: overall self-esteem; Middle level: specific self-esteem (how they perceive themselves at work) and Lowest level: specific task

- Creating a warm, easygoing climate in the classroom
- Helping students get to know one another at the beginning of the year
- Using drama and role-playing situations
- Having students speak to the class in groups or panels rather than individually
- Allowing students to work with classmates with whom they feel most comfortable
- Having students speak from their seats rather than from the front of the room
- Presenting students with oral activities in a developmental sequence.

In so doing, students learn how to deal with speaker apprehension (stage fright) and they can develop confidence through:

Preparing thoroughly

Familiarizing themselves with PS rhetorical situations

Developing the desire to communicate

Along with formal instruction (teaching), students can increase their PS abilities,

- a) through informal context by assigning take-away tasks as a reinforcement activity. For instance, asking them to observe speakers in public and rhetorical situations through TV, reading, research, asking for feedback. (e.g. Watch a speech and then write a paper that evaluates its quality),
- b) through exposure to different speeches,
- c) from their classmates in the classroom when they give short speeches.

### **PS and Academic life and benefits**

Starting with the premise that a good command of English requires and implies a good mastery of speaking skills, the course on Public Speaking aims not only at developing speaking skills but also at sharpening listening skills in the students.

Students will have the opportunity not only to present speeches but to listen to many as well. Similarly, given the fact that speakers are not born, but they are made, students are therefore required to acquire and develop some public speaking skills, listening skills and critical thinking skills that will put them at an advantage in many rhetorical situations in which they might find themselves, not necessarily during their academic life but also

after graduating from the university. Many theorists (Adams and Hamm, 1991; Devito, 1994) have pointed out that it is impossible to be an effective speaker (or listener or critic) without being an effective critical thinker (p. 15).

The skills of Public Speaking involve the skills of critical thinking, both work together and reinforce each other. Therefore, listening to speeches is as important as to presenting them. Students can develop habits of analysis and memory, a framework within which to think critically, to criticize and evaluate a speech. What follows are some of the critical thinking skills highlighted and outlined by theorists (Ennis 1987; Nickerson, 1987; Mc Carthy, 1991; Brandsford, Sherwood and Lurdevant, 1987 cited in Devito, 1994 and Sellnow, 2005):

- evaluate and use evidence
- organize thoughts clearly and logically
- define and explain concepts and problems specifically and unambiguously
- discover valid and relevant information
- distinguish between logical and illogical assumptions and inferences
- evaluate validity of an argument
- judge critically and with good reasons
- identify the characteristics of an effective speech topic
- identify the principles for conducting research

In addition, it is worth mentioning that PS provides the knowledge, cultivates the skills and models the habits of effective thoughts and expression. Students are presented with a wide range of topic choices that students can make use of in specific rhetorical situations. In the same vein, PS aims at developing the ability to do some reading and research throughout their academic years, research that includes on-line research, and to use research time effectively. In so doing, they will learn how to decide what they want to speak about and to select what to say, as well as learn how to find the materials for a speech. During their academic years, they can develop abilities such as how to support an argument with all the variable means of persuasion, how to organize a variety of messages for persuasiveness, how to map and structure a given speech, as well as how to take notes.

Similarly, PS offers guidelines to students to effectively express and receive classroom criticism with the aim of developing specific communication skills. For instance, they learn how to define, describe and

demonstrate and what strategies to use to identify different types of discourse such as informative, persuasive, narrative, and descriptive. They also learn how to select appropriate organizational patterns, considering rhetorical resources such as logical cohesive devices, grammatical cohesive devices and lexical devices. Because today's society is a visual one, and TV programs and advertisements use sophisticated computer technology and art composition, students need to know how to effectively use Visual Aids.

In PS, students are introduced to audience analysis from both a psychological and social perspective (Beebe and Beebe, 2000). They learn how to gain audience attention, motivate them, and establish a connection as well as close the speech.

### **P S and Social Development and Professional life**

In addition to its personal and academic role, the course in PS contributes to the development of students' social skills. Indeed, PS provides students with many strategies that enable them to succeed in many different walks in life. For instance, it helps them to be more competent and active citizens (not jug learners, but candle learners). Students are empowered with the necessary skills that will allow them to become good citizens. PS also helps them understand public issues and social controversies and to decide what they think about them and participate effectively in resolving them.

Equally important, PS equips them with the necessary skills to effectively participate better in the public forum and help them strengthen their democratic life. It has been shown in the USA that communication skills have topped the list of skills that employers seek in new recruits (Sellnow, 2005). Communication skills have been found to be foundational. Employers know that they could train their employees again and again as new technologies emerge. It has been my personal experience in the pre-service training school where I had the privilege to examine candidates in the oral skills and how the latter influenced me by their effective communication skills during the interview.

### **Limitations**

Incorporating PS in the current reform in education may be a difficult enterprise to effectively implement due to the large size of classes and the increasing number of students enrolled every year. PS requires that classes be of a small size to give a chance for all the students to participate.

Moreover, the lack of equipped classrooms with sophisticated materials, such as computers connected to the Internet, may put students at a disadvantage to achieve the desired results for which the course has been designed.

## **Conclusion**

Incorporating PS courses within the university program will undoubtedly contribute considerably to the development of our students' personal, academic and social life. It is a course that integrates and combines both content and language courses in the university program. In other words, it is a course that consolidates other courses taken at the university in which case students have better chances to put into practice what they have learned in theory. No wonder, then, why some researchers suggest that PS may be used as the single most important core course in the entire curriculum. It should be an integral part of a required curriculum for undergraduate and postgraduate studies at the university. It is a course that is still in its infancy. If our students are to achieve the goals set out in this presentation and to gain insights from its principles, it is deemed relevant that this course be extended to and implemented in other English departments in Morocco.

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