

A Procedure for Delivering Successful Oral Presentations in Conversation Classes



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The publication of ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners (1998) has introduced a new perspective on how to rate the performance of speakers/listeners and writers/readers in foreign language communication events. While the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986) presented speaking skills as used in a dialogic situation and writing skills as used in non-dialogic situations, the K-12 Performance Guidelines (ACTFL, 1998) and the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century (1996) emphasize the notion that indeed both speaking and writing may be part of dialogic and non-dialogic events. This new perspective constitutes an important fine-tuning as learners' performance within the speaking/listening domain will differ markedly depending on whether the act of communication is interpersonal, interpretive, or presentational (ACTFL, 1998). Within the speaking domain, which is the focus of this article, the K-12 Performance Guidelines (ACTFL, 1998, p. 4) define these terms as follows: (a) Interpersonal communication involves the participation of the speaker in a dialogic event, i.e., there is active negotiation of meaning; (b) Interpretive communication occurs when the listener has to extract information in a situation where the listener cannot interact with the speaker, i.e., there is no active negotiation of meaning; and (c) Presentational communication involves the speaker's delivery of an oral presentation, i.e., there is no direct opportunity for active negotiation of meaning.

The Presentational mode as it relates to speaking and to college/university conversation classes is at the center of the issue discussed here, namely, the proposal of a procedure to facilitate successful oral presentations in a foreign language. These oral presentations are tasks of the same nature as those typically assigned in public speaking classes, usually hosted by the English or speech communication departments.

While I draw on experience with third-year college/university foreign language courses, many of the issues and procedures presented here may also apply and be adapted to lower-division college/university foreign language courses or courses offered at the K-12 level. As indicated in the K-12 Performance Guidelines (ACTFL, 1998), tasks involving the Presentational mode (speaking) can appear at different proficiency levels from the Novice through the Pre-Advanced range.

The Conversation Class¹

The conversation class is a staple in the minor and major of most foreign language programs and, accordingly, the textbook market offers products geared to these courses (Furry & Jarausch, 2001; Chandler, 1998; Lively, Williams & Harper, 1994; Schmitt, 1995; Schmitt, 1991). The focus of these textbooks and others available on the market is primarily speaking that takes place in a dialogic format, with virtually no attention given to formats that require paragraph-length oral discourse.² Even when the textbooks feature assignments that require students to give an oral presentation on a specific topic, the assignments are defined in terms of a broad topic, such as "Give a talk about your favorite movie or your favorite book." It is then up to the instructor to set parameters on how students are to prepare for the presentation, the duration of the talk/presentation, the interaction with the audience, and other issues relevant to the oral presentation. The vagueness that characterizes the description of oral presentations contrasts sharply with the desirable careful attention that composition writing has been receiving for the last ten years, reflected by the fact that most textbooks, not only at the third-year level but also at the elementary and intermediate levels, focus on the final product and provide guidance concerning how to deal with the process of writing (Valdés et al., 1999; Gerrard, Rusterholz & Long, 1993). There seems to be no reason why the foreign language profession appears to have overlooked the process involved in the oral presentation event as paragraph-length discourse.

The current situation can be attributed to the fact that the so-called conversation class, also sometimes called advanced conversation and composition (Jogan, Heredia, & Aguilera, 2001; Koike & Biron, 1996; Lafford, 1987), seems to have unclear objectives as far as speaking skills are concerned. This problem can be easily resolved if we examine carefully the role that this class should have in the minor or major (Bueno, 2002; Mittman, 1999). Few would argue that the conversation class represents a threshold between intermediate-level language classes and the subject matter offerings in culture, literature, linguistics, and the professions—courses for business, law enforcement, and the health professions. Therefore, the objectives of a conversation class should be consistent with those

found on both sides of the threshold between the lower and upper levels of study. The link with the intermediate level has traditionally been addressed, as is apparent in the dialogic tasks that we find in textbooks designed for the conversation class. It is the link with the subject-matter courses that needs to be established.

Subject-matter classes focus on learning information on a particular subject for the duration of the course. Students in these courses are also expected to demonstrate some level of research ability as well as the ability to verbalize through writing and/or speaking about what has been researched or learned. As indicated above, students have experienced the dynamics of writing as a process by the time they reach the subject matter courses, which is aligned with the expectation that students must know how to manage the process of writing in order to function effectively in upper-division courses. However, while instructors may rightfully have similar expectations in these courses when they ask students to give a presentation on a topic, the reality is that many students may have little experience with this type of academic presentation in the foreign language. This state of affairs is a less-than-desirable situation that can be remedied by making the oral presentation a permanent feature in conversation classes and by managing the process of the assignment so that it is monitored with the same care as the process of writing.

Benefits/Assumptions Associated with Oral Presentations

While an analysis of the benefits of public speaking is beyond the scope of this article, it seems appropriate to remind ourselves of some of the pedagogical assumptions underlying the oral presentation as an academic task.

1. The oral presentation provides an opportunity for gaining awareness of new rhetorical devices that are dictated by the characteristics of the rhetorical situation. The very nature of most foreign language curricula reinforces the practice of spoken discourse that occurs in the informal domain while formal discourse is most often associated with compositions, essays, and longer papers. It is only when students perform as public speakers of the foreign language that they realize that an oral presentation features elements usually present both in informal dialogic discourse and those normally prevalent in

formal written discourse (Hornberger, 1989; Mangelsdorf, 1989; Chafe & Danielwicz, 1987; Halliday, 1987; Horowitz & Samuels, 1987). As an example, presenters may rely on features typically present in conversations, such as visual contact with their audience and fillers such as “well,” “let’s see,” “okay,” while at the same time they may need to resort to more complex syntax or vocabulary that are often encountered in formal academic writing.

2. The oral presentation provides students with the opportunity to experience the creative process as an event that is very similar to the paper writing process (Oswal, 2002; Saunders, 1985; O’Keefe, 1981). In either case, the writer/speaker has to be involved in the dynamics of generating ideas, translating those ideas into words, designing the structure into which those ideas need to be inserted, and revising them.
3. If the topic is appropriately chosen, the oral presentation provides a fertile ground for students to attempt the use of their oral skills while integrating morphosyntactic and discourse structures that characterize more advanced proficiency levels as defined by ACTFL (1999) and that begin to be present in the speech of Intermediate-High learners: “With some consistency, speakers at the Intermediate-High speaking level narrate and describe in major time frames using connected discourse of paragraph length” (p. 4).
4. Many voices in different fields have repeatedly indicated that the focus of teaching has to move away from instructor-fronted activities and toward student-centered instruction (Wenden, 2002; Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Nunan, 1993; Thomson, 1992). The oral presentation is very appropriate for applying the principles of the student-centered philosophy since students can have some latitude in selecting a topic of their interest, and their performance is at the center of the class dynamics while the instructor’s role becomes secondary during the presentation.

These benefits can be fully realized only if students manage all stages of the speaking assignment thoroughly and reflectively.

That said, it needs to be acknowledged that some instructors may be reluctant to integrate the oral presentation systematically in their classes as it does present two major caveats. One has to do with the logistics of time. One five-minute presentation may take as long as ten minutes of the class by the time the post-presenta-

tion discussion is over. If an instructor has twenty students, the cumulative class time dedicated to one oral presentation is four class periods of fifty minutes. The second caveat is to ensure that the rest of the class will stay engaged while the presenter is giving the talk. The time concern may be minimized as instructors realize that the benefits that students may derive from an appropriately monitored oral presentation makes the class time employed worthwhile. As far as keeping students engaged, some instructors have students fill out an evaluation form after each presentation. Instructors can also have the class summarize the information in those presentations that lend themselves best to summarizing.

Maximizing Students’ Success

One of the keys to success in most academic endeavors is the role that reflection plays in students’ awareness of both the goal of a task and the process involved in achieving it. As students are guided through the task process—the oral presentation assignment—they are led into what Dewey (1998, p. 12) calls reflective thinking, which he defines as “a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and an act of searching, hunting, inquiring to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity.” In the case of language learners, the “state of doubt” surfaces when they realize the limitations of their knowledge on the topics they want to discuss and the gaps in their language skills. This awareness is the step that spurs the searching necessary to gain knowledge on the topic and on the linguistic means needed to convey ideas.

Monitoring the students’ preparation process can maximize the successful completion of the assignment by ensuring that students approach the tasks in an informed manner (Commander & Smith, 1996; Smith 1991).

In many instances, the students’ inability to deliver a good presentation is rooted in their lack of understanding of the preparation process, which results in an inadequate approach to the tasks involved, including selecting and organizing the content of the presentation. Granted, most people are inexperienced in public speaking and have an instinctive fear of speaking in public, attention to the process can minimize negative effects and improve the quality of presentations.

The Oral Presentation and the Process

The process of preparing and presenting an oral presentation begins with the instructor’s conveying to the students

what the requirements of the assignment are. An instructor interested in the process approach to oral presentations should create instructions that address the following issues: (1) defining the topic, (2) providing information sources, (3) assisting the audience, (4) keeping track of the preparation process, (5) organizing the talk, (6) delivering the talk, and (7) obtaining the desired grade (see Appendix A). Addressing these issues in the manner suggested below not only assists students in the process of preparing a presentation but also ensures comparability across presentations when assessing student performance.

1. Defining the topic—The definition of the topic should be consistent with a topic covered in class so that the presentation fits thematically in the syllabus.³
2. Providing information sources—Providing sources of information will minimize research time and will allow students to allocate more time to working out how to express and organize their ideas, and to rehearse their delivery. Minimizing research time is consistent with the fact that research depth is not usually a goal in conversation classes. However, if instructors feel that the oral presentation assignment needs to reflect a depth of research comparable to that required in subject-matter courses, they need to provide guidelines describing what is expected from their students. These guidelines are beyond the scope of this article, but interested readers may find some guideline models in Britsch (1998), Fister (1992), and Ford & Perry (1982).
3. Assisting the audience. Students are often so concerned about how their instructor will evaluate them while delivering an oral presentation that they forget that a very important part of the presentation event is to succeed in conveying their message to their classmates. This problem can be managed by instructing students on how they are expected to interact with the audience. The sample instructions in Appendix A show three instances in which students are required to pay attention to their audience. One requirement is that students need to make a handout outlining the contents of the presentation and distribute a copy to each student in the class.⁴ Another is that they need to be attuned to their audience by anticipating their needs and answering clarification requests that may occur during the presentation. Admittedly, few students may be able to anticipate the

audience's needs, but most of them are able to answer extemporaneous questions during and after the presentation. Finally, grading criteria numbers 1 and 6, which refer to the quality of the handout and the interaction with the audience, respectively, reiterate the importance of the audience in the dynamics of the presentation.

4. Keeping track of the preparation process. The most manageable way to direct and monitor the process of preparation is to have students assemble a mini-portfolio⁵ that includes the sources of their ideas, the drafts and notes that preceded the final form of the speech, evidence of having edited⁶ their work, and a self-report on the preparation process (see Appendix B).
5. Organizing the talk. As indicated earlier, few students are well-acquainted with the oral presentation as an assignment, and they are often at a loss as to what information to include in their speech. Ideally, the first oral assignment should provide some specific guidelines from which students can infer some organizational notions that they can apply to successive assignments (see Appendix A, part II. 2).
6. Delivering the talk. Regarding the actual presentation event, clear guidelines need to be in place indicating how long the presentation should be, how much presenters may rely on cue cards or any other type of written information during the presentation, and how presenters need to handle the audience (see Appendix A, part III. 1-3).⁷
7. Obtaining the desired grade. The grading criteria need to reflect not only the importance of language accuracy during the presentation but also the other aspects that tend to be overlooked by the students, namely, paying attention to the quality of the handout on which the audience will rely as an aid for comprehension; the clarity, quality, and organization of the ideas; controlling the temptation to lapse into English; paying attention to the needs of the audience; and focusing on the quality of the preparation process (see Appendix A, part IV).

Assessing the Preparation Process

It was pointed out earlier that, in order to obtain good results for oral assignments, students need to be aware of the very process involved in getting ready for a successful talk (Davidson, Deuser, & Stenberg, 1994; Tsui, 1993; Rowe, 1988). Once instructors do their part by providing directions that promote understand-

ing of what the assignment is all about and what students are expected to do, students need to commit to preparing thoroughly, as a good presentation is usually the outcome of carefully revised planning.

One useful tool for assessing the quality of the work in which students engage prior to delivering their talk is a questionnaire that makes students reflect on their own work (Appendix B). Questionnaires like the one provided here foster introspection and self-analysis, a crucial phase in the learning process by which students gain awareness of what they did or did not do to accomplish the goals of the assignment (Yancey, 1996). This type of questionnaire is also a valuable tool for instructors not only to observe the quality of the preparation process but also to determine what contributed to the success or the failure of the presentation, thus affording instructors the ability to provide constructive criticism. As an assessment instrument, the questionnaire proves more reliable when students accompany it with their actual notes and drafts in which the different edits can actually be observed.⁸

Conclusion

Managing oral presentations in the way that has been presented here may encourage instructors, especially those less-experienced, to give oral presentations a more central role in the conversation class. No doubt oral presentations may seem intimidating to some instructors, since they may regard this type of assignment difficult to grade because of the elusiveness of some of the aspects involved in the oral presentation event, such as weighing morphosyntactic accuracy and morphosyntactic sophistication or clarity of ideas and depth of content. Students, for their part, may perceive this type of assignment as more challenging than it actually is, due primarily to their inability to break down the assignment into manageable tasks. The procedure suggested here is intended to make the oral presentation assignment more manageable for both instructors and students by providing a flexible framework that instructors may adapt to the needs of their courses.

Notes

1 The term "conversation class" is a label used in many colleges/universities to refer to a type of class usually taken after the second (intermediate) year of college foreign language study and before students begin to take subject matter courses in literature, civilization, or linguistics. This course may be offered as a fifth- or sixth-semester class.

- 2 The term "paragraph-length discourse" is used here in reference to discourse composed of one or more paragraphs. The paragraph, as opposed to isolated sentences, features a central idea developed by means of a number of sentences connected through expressions that may enhance notions such as, contrast—however, on the other hand, and in contrast; or notions of addition—furthermore, additionally, and also.
- 3 The topics that we cover in class are as follows: environmental issues, Hispanics in the USA, Velázquez, Frida Kahlo, and Diego Rivera. Students have to choose a topic related to the issues discussed in class. For instance, they may talk about an essay, an article, a book or a movie whose topic relates to environmental issues or immigration, or they may talk about a painting by Velázquez, Frida Kahlo, or Diego Rivera.
- 4 Some students do not know the difference between an outline and an abstract. They would benefit from seeing a sample of both. Limiting the handout to a length of one hundred words ensures that students will not turn the handout into a script from which they might read.
- 5 In English composition classes, a portfolio is usually a collection of samples of a student's work produced at different points in the semester with the purpose of observing the student's progress. Portfolios often include a statement from students in which they reflect on their accomplishments (Calfee and Perfumo, 1996). I have adapted the portfolio idea so that I can observe and assess the depth of the work that the student completed to get ready for the presentation. Instead of the reflective self-assessment required in English composition portfolios, I have students complete a questionnaire that asks specific questions about how they proceeded during the preparation process (see Appendix B). I use the mini-portfolio to identify aspects of the preparation stage that may have contributed to some unsatisfactory aspect of the presentation.
- 6 Assisted editing is always a controversial aspect in foreign language classes. On the one hand, we want to make sure that the work we receive is the work of one specific student as opposed to somebody else's; and on the other, we as writers know that another reader can detect grammar errors and gaps in the message that even good writers cannot catch in their own writing. I suggest that, unless instructors can provide the editing, students be allowed to use tutoring services, especially if the tutors are trained to help students figure out how to correct errors once they are pointed out to them.
- 7 Before the presentation begins I remind each presenter that his/her classmates and I can interrupt to request clarification in the target language. I also tell each speaker that I will signal to them two minutes before the end of the allotted time.

8 The trends that I have observed in the responses provided on the questionnaires are as follows:

- (1) The less proficient the student, the more crucial becomes the amount of preparation time.
- (2) The lower the student's proficiency, the more crucial it is to carry out editing.
- (3) Students dislike having to talk in front of the whole class, and what they like the most is the opportunity to find out more about the topic they choose as well as the latitude to choose a topic.
- (4) Students consistently indicate that the assignment is fair and the expectations are clearly described. Occasionally, the most proficient students have complained about the quality of some presentations.
- (5) The least proficient students who do not do well in the first presentation tend to allocate more preparation time for the second, which usually yields a better presentation.

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APPENDIX A

Oral Presentation #1 and #2 Guidelines

- I. Presentation 1 Topic: Prepare a presentation about a musician or band. Should you rather talk about a different topic, please consult with me.
Presentation 2 Topic: The topic has to be intellectually stimulating and appealing and has to bear some connection with one of the topics covered in class. No show-and-tell or how-to presentations are acceptable. Among other possibilities, you may talk about a book or a movie.
- II. Your presentation (IN SPANISH) should include the following:
 1. A typed handout (100 words maximum) outlining (IN SPANISH) the different parts of your presenta-

tion. Bring copies to hand out to your audience.

2. The oral part needs to include the following: a report on the sources of information you used, why you want to talk about the topic of your choice, why the topic may be of interest to your audience, a report on the information you gathered and a conclusion.

III. Procedures:

1. You cannot read off a script, but you may refer to your 100-word handout.
2. Be prepared to explain IN SPANISH any terminology your audience might not understand, and respond IN SPANISH to any questions you might be asked. The audience may interrupt the speaker at any time to request clarification of ideas and any of these requests should be done IN SPANISH or should be otherwise ignored by the presenter.
3. Your presentation should be between 5 and 8 minutes long.
4. On the day of your presentation, you will have to turn in:
 - a list of references

- any drafts or notes you wrote in the process of preparing for your presentation
- evidence of having edited your work and done your best effort to prepare for this assignment
- completed self-report

IV. Your grade will be based on:

1. Language accuracy, quality, and organization of ideas in the handout
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Pronunciation, pausing, and overall fluency
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Syntactical complexity and accuracy (superfluous/missing words and word order)
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Transitions, clarity, quality, and organization of the ideas during the presentation
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Level of success when explaining terminology, or answering questions. Use of English
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. Speaker's concern for his/her audience's reception of the message
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. Morphological accuracy (gender/number agreement, adverb vs adjective, verb tense)
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
8. Vocabulary accuracy
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
9. Timing (duration of five minutes as a minimum and eight minutes as a maximum)
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10. Consistency with assignment specifications
1 2 3 4 5
11. Preparation process
1 2 3 4 5

Your grade may be penalized if directions in parts I-III are not followed

V. Newspapers in the Atkins Library:

El País Internacional (from Madrid, Spain)

Newspapers on-line:

CNN Interactive (USA):
cnnenespanol.com/

List of newspapers: www.geocities.com/Athens/4444/nemag.html

Music Magazines on line:
www.mundolatino.org/Cultura/Musica/Revistas

APPENDIX B

Presentation # _____

Spring ____ / Fall ____ Student's name _____

Self-report on planning for the oral presentation

1. Did you prepare this activity at home? Yes No
2. Did you write a script? Yes No
3. Did you have your script checked by a more proficient speaker of the language? Yes No
4. How long did you prepare for this assignment? _____hrs
5. How many times did you rehearse your presentation? _____
6. At some point, did you rehearse while using your one-hundred-word handout only? Yes No
7. Did you rehearse in front of other people? Yes No
8. Did you make inquiries to find out how unfamiliar expressions are pronounced? Yes No
9. Did you tape yourself while rehearsing your presentation? Yes No
10. Did you time yourself while rehearsing? Yes No
11. Did you have your handout checked by a more proficient speaker of the language? Yes No

12. Write a list of the people you consulted with and indicate whether they are friends, classmates, tutors or instructors.

_____ friend classmate tutor instructor

_____ friend classmate tutor instructor

_____ friend classmate tutor instructor

_____ friend classmate tutor instructor

_____ friend classmate tutor instructor

13. What did you like the least and the most about this experience?

14. What recommendation do you have for your instructor?
