G. Velichkova

New Bulgarian University, Sofia

A COURSE MODEL FOR DEVELOPING ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS FOR ADVANCED LEVEL LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

This article aims to present a course model devised to meet the needs of learners of English as a foreign language for focused training on oral presentation skills. The course model presented, which is in essence a student-centred training course, combines researching and summarizing the information for the presentation skills with presenting the information gained to the peer students as well as assessing the presentations delivered, using the criteria established by the institution where the presenters are expected to deliver presentations.

Keywords: *presentation; presentation skills; presentation delivery; presentation skills course; research; delivery; assessment.*

The recent years have brought the development of technologies to an extent allowing people to communicate worldwide, exchanging huge amounts of information. Therefore it is only natural for a form combining the established means of persuasion with the efficiency of the visual aids to gain popularity as a means of sharing important information among individuals and audiences in various contexts. The presentation being a rhetorical form of this type has become a universal means of sharing information as its specific form and features, if delivered effectively and successfully ensure the strong impact on the audience, thus contributing to the presenter's personal, educational or professional development.

This tendency to use this specific form of speech so widely presupposes that foreign language is to be used not only for survival in a non-native environment or for exchanging information on a wider cultural context, but also for higher level of communication. This poses one more task to be addressed through the language education so as to assist the students in their attempts to adapt to the increasingly growing demands of the academic and the professional fields. The language education should also therefore adapt to the changing environment and effectively prepare students to meet the challenges of everyday life.

The specificities of the presentation – the fact that it is a form of speech, the persuasive potential of the verbal and non-verbal communication employed – require mastering certain skills on the part of the presenter, which include, as Aristotle has defined in Book 1 of Rhetoric [1], "the style, or language, to be used", as well as certain non verbal means of persuasion. Therefore, attempting at improving presentation skills of students naturally resides in the general language courses at

higher levels allowing students to use language as a means of effective communication, not merely for survival in a foreign language environment. And it is a fact already that the didactical materials for higher language levels pay certain attention to presentation skills, be it only as a means of developing speaking skills in general. Many examples could be given, especially with the commonly used English for Special Purposes (ESP) course books, such as Market Leader or Business Result but also in the widely used EGP course books (e.g. English File).

These skills are widely discussed in various sources, available for all interested persons. There is in fact so much information provided by specialists in the field that it arouses frustration in the individual student, trying to prepare on their own for an important presentation. Therefore in order to assist students in their presentation skills improvement, a focused research on a specific skill, conducted by a learner, should turn out to be a lot more efficient, provided that the latter is part of a focused training course which ensures that other students will research the other important skills and all course participants will contribute to a concise and focused, but yet comprehensive guide to the specific skills a successful presenter needs to master. This idea is based on one of the basic assumptions of the communicative approach, and it ensures the participation of all students if their roles are thoughtfully distributed

Another problem which needs to be addressed when facilitating for the improvement of the presentation skills of the language learners is the fact that rhetorical speeches characterize themselves by being carefully prepared in advance and rarely if ever does the successful orator resort to mere improvisation. The preliminary preparation and practice is crucial for presentations as well, and it is in fact outlined in both professional and educational guides for presenters as one of the key success factors – the "most important stage" [2]. So for a presentation skills course it is important to provide chances for participants to carefully prepare for and practice delivering a full presentation.

Specialists refer to this premise for success as "planning" and "rehearsal" and unanimously advise that the latter be done with at least one partner who would give honest feedback and help the speaker improve their performance [3, p. 113]. Therefore, a specialized training on presentation skills, and what is more, one in an educational environment needs to provide opportunities for practicing delivery within the training course. This is of course provided for partly in both language didactical materials (for as it was previously mentioned, presentation skills are now an indispensable part of the language skills syllabi) and in specialized training courses focused on presentations there are exercises which aim to give learners chances to practice certain aspects of the presentation delivery, but they either focus too narrowly on the language aspects of the latter or do not guarantee that all students will be provided with both the chance and the motivation to deliver a whole presentation.

Another factor, arousing the anxiety of the presenters-to-be is that they do not fully realize the criteria used for assessing their presentation, even if they are explicitly explained in writing and available for the learners. Those criteria are not universal in their full range and can vary considerably from one institution to another but they are a means of measuring success and it is through experience that those could be used for detecting weaknesses in performance and devising measures to correct them.

Having all these problems in mind and considering the increasing role of presentations as a form of sharing achievements in the academic circles, a presentation skills course was devised to meet the needs of the students who are expected to present their achievements in different university subject and face the same challenges creating anxiety and frustration if their performances do not meet the requirements of the audience.

The course model discussed is devised to address all these challenges and to provide students with chances to improve their presentation skills, focusing on the three important premises for success – the knowledge, the practice and the insight into assessment. The course is designed for university students and it is supposed to meet their specific needs, preparing them for their academic presentations and providing them with the freedom, responsibility and autonomy in learning [4] which determine the success and the effectiveness in the learning process of an adult learner.

The course is designed in a way which allows for its integration in the general English language course, or the EGP Course as it is naturally perceived as an attempt to improve the students' foreign language speaking skills. The course activities are to be administered on a regular basis throughout the period of the language course and the end of the presentation course should coincide with the end of the language course. In the ideal case the students are to deliver a presentation which renders a grade for the general language course.

The presentation skills course consists of three stages – research, practice and assessment.

The research stage aims to give students a chance to get acquainted with the theoretical explanations about the presentation skills. There are two specific features to be outlined here. Firstly, the list of skills, and secondly the information gap which is intentionally created to motivate the students to research and present the results of their research to other students. The concept of the information gap activity, underlying the organization of this stage is one of the basic pillars of the communicative approach [5, p. 83–84], if used appropriately. Appropriateness in this case is ensured by the fact that students realize the importance of knowledge of theory, so the information they exchange is of common interest and on the other hand, the situation they are encouraged to share information in is genuinely realis-

tic with the one exception that the audience is rather supportive and encouraging and not giving judgments which will not affect the future academic development of the presenter.

The list of skills depends on the specific needs of the students but it is, in general, based on the lists, outlined by specialists in the field. However many and even numerous specialists there are, they generally agree on a few basic skills, such as Competence on the subject matter and effective organization of the content, tailoring the content to the needs of the audience and ability to effectively interact with the listeners. The list chosen for this course is based on the selections of three of the acknowledged and widely cited authors, and their works on the topic, who are more or less oriented towards corporate soft skills training: Suzy Siddons [3], Steve Mandel [6] and J. Weissman [7]. The list however follows a rather different taxonomy, based on the view outlined by Aristotle [1], that a successful speaker should master three basic modes of persuasion: "ethos, pathos and logos". Therefore the basic presentation skills are presented to the students in the following list:

1. Ethos (the personality or the honesty of the speaker, qualities that would make him/her credible)

a) demonstrating good organization of the performance

b) demonstrating good control on timing

c) demonstrating the ability to effectively organize the content of the presentation

2. Pathos (the ability to appeal to the emotions of the audience)

a) demonstrating ability to attract and sustain the attention of the audience

b) demonstrating good knowledge about the audience

c) demonstrating the ability to use proper visuals

d) demonstrating good command of body language, intonation and tone of voice;

3. Logos (the ability to competently present the information)

a) demonstrating good knowledge on the subject;

b) demonstrating effective question management;

The skills so presented are organized in a schedule for presenting and each student chooses a date of convenience, thus giving students a say in the organization of the learning process. Each student then takes the responsibility to process the otherwise incomprehensible information and present it to the others, while the others do the same with their bits, so that in the end all students have contributed to compiling a guide into the presentation skills.

The presentation stage on the other hand is not merely intended to share the findings of the research each student has made, but also to give them a chance to practice presentation delivery with the assumption that "experiential learning" [8, p. 92] is a very effective way of acquiring knowledge and experience simultaneously.

Furthermore it is of considerable importance to point out that however effective learning through practice might be, if the practicing is intertwined with the stress of presenting in real conditions – i.e. presenting information which is important for the presenters future development, in front of audience which might have impact on the latter – this might defocus the students from the ultimate objective – to improve their presentation skills. This stage of the course is solely devoted to improving presentation skills through presenting them in front of a benevolent audience who are not there to merely receive the information but also to contribute to the improvement of the skills of the presenter without giving any formal grade whatsoever to their performance. The presentation is delivered in "protected" environment or with other words – students are not formally assessed for their performance, and if any comments are made these are with the only intention to provide assistance in spotting weaknesses and encouraging good practices. The successful organization of administering the course in a protected environment is, in this respect, crucial for the success of the course as it contributes to the creation of friendly ambiance and benevolence among students, who are encouraged to work in a team towards gaining mutual benefits as presenters as well as in the role of assessors.

The stage of presentation delivery is, in this respect, bound to the stage of assessment, which the audience of peers administers following well explained criteria. Ideally the criteria used for the assessment stage reflect the presentation success criteria of the institution. In any case however it is recommended that the students have been acquainted with the criteria before the commencement of the presentation stage, so that even the first presenter knows what they are expected to achieve. It is also a good idea to present the criteria in an effective way (from didactical point of view – this should ensure that all students understand the essence of the assessment procedure) and that the students are given precisely structured checklists which would eliminate any subjective or defocused remarks, based on personal attitude towards the speaker.

The rationale of the assessment stage could be drawn from the assumption that voicing the strengths and weaknesses of the performance is a powerful tool for overcoming weaknesses. The verbalization of weaknesses from the point of view of educational psychology is proved to be of primal importance when it comes to improving self-efficacy [9]. The assessment stage, being administered through valid criteria, could give the audience genuine insights into what they are expected to do, as well as warn them about the possible pitfalls of actual presentation delivery. The benefits of the assessment stage in this respect are quite significant, for both the audience and the presenter, as experiential knowledge is gained in protected environment, while at the same time seeing actual presentation delivery "life".

If the cycle process is to be presented graphically, the representation takes, the form, outlined in Figure.
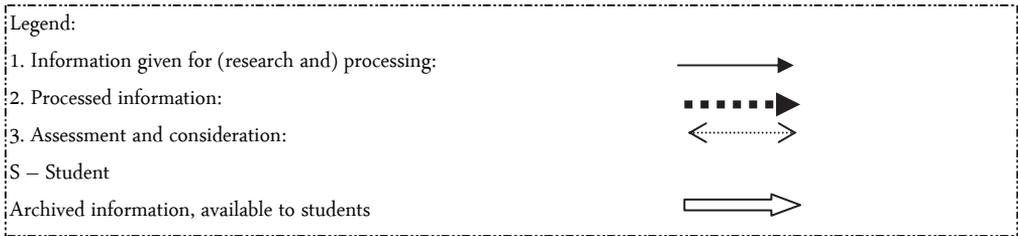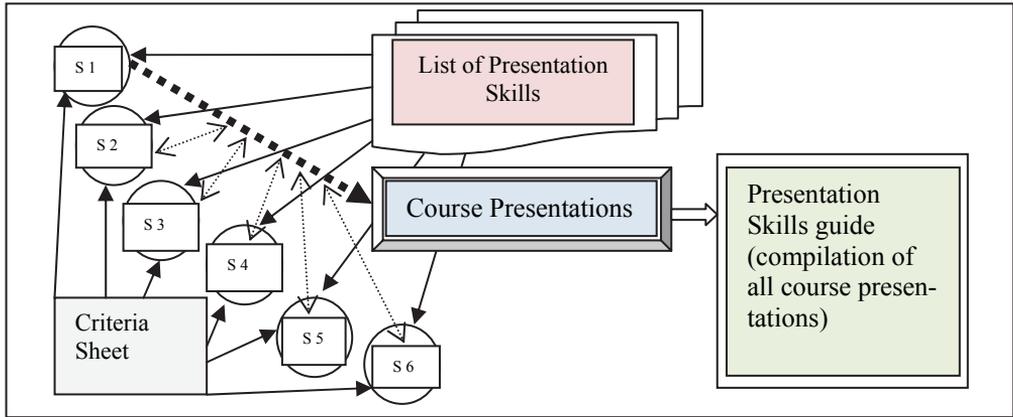
Fig. Cycle process representation

The skills are distributed among the students and each of them conducts a research into the theoretical basis about the skills. Then each student delivers a presentation with information about their skill, and the material is made available to the other students. The audience reflects on the performance of the presenter using the criteria previously discussed. Thus they give comments and ideas for improvement to the presenter, while at the same time draw conclusions about improving their own performance. After all skills have been presented, the materials are collected to form a guide into presentation skills, available to all students.

In conclusion, the course hereby described is intended to help and facilitate for students improving their presentation skills. Its innovative features include the way of structuring the list of skills as well as well as devoting practice to theory and vice versa, as well as involving assessment in the process of researching and demonstrating the theory in actual presentation delivery. The motivation for students to participate in the course is ensured through giving the students a chance to limit the scope of theoretical research and at the same time receive information in a comprehensible form and on the other hand by creating an information gap, so as to ensure that students are provided with motivation to work as a team. Another innovative aspect, which might be criticized for not contributing to the fulfillment of the EGP course objective, is creating an environment for assessment of the presentation delivered on the part of the peer students which does not render any formal

grade. This allows students to concentrate on the material presented as well as on the way it is presented, diminishing the stress aroused by procedures rendering semester grades. This process however, if properly organized should reflect on the presentation skills of the students as well as on their general speaking skills, which they should demonstrate when their performance is formally assessed. The third element which might be considered as beneficial is that students are given the assessment tools in the form of the assessment criteria, and are invited to apply them for assessing actual full presentations – unlike the practice to assess models, commonly established in other course models – thus giving them profound insight into what is expected of them and what are the ""real-life" pitfalls of presentation delivery. In combination with the fact that the content of the presentations delivered provides that theoretical basis for what a successful presentation should be like, this course model enable students to practice and evidence the three way matching between the theory, practice and audience expectations of presentation delivery.

References

1. Aristotle's Rhetoric [Online resource]. – URL: http://rhetoric.eserver.org/aristotle/ (accessed 11.02.2013).

2. Storz C. Oral Presentation Skills. – Evry, 2002.

3. Siddon S. The complete presentation skills handbook. – London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2008.

4. Knowles M. The adult Learner: A Neglected Species. – Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing Company, 1973.

5. Swan M. A Critical Look at the Communicative Approach (2) // ELT Journal. – 1985. – No. 39(2). – P. 76–87.

6. Mandel S. Effective Presentation Skills. A practical Guide to Better Speaking. – Fredericton, NB: Crisp Publications, 1995.

7. Weissman J. The Power Presenter. Technique, Style and Strategy from America's Top Speaking Coach. – Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009.

8. Itin C.M. Reasserting the Philosophy of Experiential Education as a Vehicle for Change in the 21st Century // The Journal of Experiential Education. – 1999. – No. 22(2). – P. 91–98.

9. Gutiérrez-Martínez O., Carmen Luciano Soriano M., Valdivia-Salas S. Change of Self-Efficacy Verbalisations and Derivations of Functions // Psichothema. – 2005. – Vol. 17., no. 4. – P. 614–619.

Г. Величкова

МОДЕЛЬ КУРСА ПО РАЗВИТИЮ УМЕНИЙ УСТНОЙ ПРЕЗЕНТАЦИИ ДЛЯ ИЗУЧАЮЩИХ АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК КАК ИНОСТРАННЫЙ НА ПРОДВИНУТОМ ЭТАПЕ

Рассматривается модель курса, разработанного для изучающих английский язык как иностранный и направленного на формирование умений устной презентации. В представленном курсе реализован принцип личностно ориентированного подхода к обучению. В основе курса лежит идея сочетания таких этапов работы, как поиск и обобщение необходимой информации, собственно презентация перед студенческой аудиторией и ее оценка по критериям той организации, в которой предусматривается выступление.

Ключевые слова: *презентация, умения презентации, выступление с презентацией, курс по формированию умений презентации, исследование, выступление, оценивание.*