

Promising Practices

This is an ongoing column, featuring advice for effective teaching. Please send article submissions to the column editor, Elizabeth Fonseca, at columns@idiom.nystesol.org

Getting My ESL Class Started

by Ann C. Wintergerst

When I meet my advanced ESL oral/aural communication class at St. John's University for the first class meeting of the semester, I have my students complete an ESL class sheet with some useful background information about themselves. This questionnaire includes their name, address, telephone number, email address, gender, major, graduate or undergraduate, home country, native language, years of English studied, U.S. high school graduate or not, time in the United States, date of the ESL Placement Test, graduate of the IEP at St. John's or not, and ESL courses taken or currently taking. Of special interest to me is their personal evaluation of their English language proficiency. They must circle their answers regarding their writing, grammar, reading, and speaking and listening ability on a five-item Likert scale: excellent, very good, good, average, or poor. The more often students assess themselves, the more skilled they become at self-evaluation (Van Houten, 2006). They must also list three specific areas in which they want to improve during the semester. This information helps me when setting up my semester plan.

Course Requirements

Once this task is completed, I distribute my course requirement sheet, listing the course, the time it meets, the professor, office hours, and the textbook and other requirements. Our ESL courses carry three credits, comparable to our foreign language courses, and are offered on a pass-fail basis; students need to know what is expected of them to pass my course. They must demonstrate improvement in their listening and speaking skills throughout the semester. Only four absences are permitted—otherwise, an automatic failure of the class results, and five late arrivals are counted as one absence. To get my students to come to class on time, I start each class with a five-minute pronunciation practice review. Homework assignments must be completed daily, and students must come to class prepared. Active participation in class activities related to listening and note-taking skills, evaluating information, phonology, and syntax is required. Students must also contribute to group discussions and be prepared to deliver various speeches: information, impromptu, persuasive, and others as assigned. A passing grade on the midterm and final exam is expected. Students are also required to attend the Global Language and Culture Center (GLCC), a state-of-the-art language resource center where students can practice the many languages offered at St. John's with or without a tutor, and where ESL students can also use the computers and the software that complement their ESL speech courses. Students are required to attend the center 10 times per course to work on areas of pronunciation or listening skills, either alone or with an ESL tutor. All cell phones are to be turned off upon entering the classroom, and only English is to be spoken. If students have any problems, they are encouraged to speak to me during my office hours. If they are absent from class, they must call a classmate for the homework assignment and bring it to the next class meeting.

Ice Breaker

After these information procedures are completed, I involve the class in an ice breaker. This activity removes some of the tension encountered when meeting new students in the first class session and establishes a comfort level for the remaining semester. I begin by dividing the students into pairs to interview each other, take notes, and report back to the class. I poll the languages represented and have them work with someone who does not speak their native language (if possible) and someone they do not know. An interview sheet with questions for them to ask is distributed:

What is your name?

Where are you from? What is your native language?

How long have you been in the United States?

Why did you come to the United States?

How many brothers or sisters do you have?

Did any of your siblings, relatives, or friends go to St. John's?

With whom do you live?

What are you studying at St. John's?

What hobbies or interests do you have?

What are your future plans?

How will you benefit from taking this ESL speaking/listening course?

Add any other questions you wish to ask.

The students can write their answers to these questions on the distributed sheet. Because the questions serve only as a guide, they can choose to ask just the questions that interest them. I allow 20 minutes for this activity, and then have the students come to the podium, with their partner standing next to them, and report orally to the class what was learned. The class takes notes of at least four to five items to remember about each person. In this way, everyone sees everyone and gets to know everyone as they work together for the next 15 weeks.

After their introductions, I ask a few questions to see if the students remembered any of the information presented; the interviewer and interviewee about whom the information is asked are not to respond. Finally, I share some information about myself and then ask the students how they felt about this activity. Their comments are mostly favorable, so a good tone is set for the classes to follow. With a class size of 17 students, this activity cannot be completed in the first 1.5 hours of class, so it is continued in the next class meeting.

Tips for Effective Speech Presentations

One of my class requirements is that students give different types of speeches. To help them, I offer these eight suggestions for a successful speech presentation:

1. Lessen stage fright and nervousness: be well prepared, choose an interesting topic, be well organized
2. Maintain good posture: do not lean forward or look casual
3. Display facial expressions: smile, be expressive and animated, show emotions
4. Watch movement and gestures: take a few steps, move hands/arms, don't stand frozen
5. Make eye contact: look from one section of the classroom to another for feedback; don't stare or look out the window
6. Speak with enthusiasm: care about your subject; use a strong voice
7. Vary speaking rate: change speed—with complex information, deliver slower; with happy information, deliver faster
8. Practice: rehearse, practice, record yourself at home

Sharing these tips gives my students insight on what is expected in their oral presentations.

Texts

The textbook that I use in my advanced oral/aural communication class is *Speech Communication Made Simple—Book 2*, by Paulette Dale and James C. Wolf (2013). The student book, which includes a CD-ROM with an MP3 audio of sample speeches and pronunciation activities, will prepare students for success in both presentations and academic discussions by building their confidence as a speaker. The book features varied speech types from personal narration to persuasive speeches, projects for interviews and group discussions, a scaffolding approach for a presentation, and pronunciation practice, idioms, and useful language tips.

The other text I use is *Learn to Listen, Listen to Learn: Academic Listening and Note-Taking, Book 2*, by Roni Lebauer (2010) for their practice work in the GLCC. The student needs to buy only the first textbook for my class, as the GLCC provides the CDs and this second book for the listening and note-taking component of my class. This book offers valuable tips for listening to college lectures by focusing on organization of information, recognizing language cues, and acquiring vocabulary. Both books cover the skills that I want my students to master in my class.

Conclusion

When we teach our ESL students the language skills needed to be successful in an academic environment, we count not only on the skillfulness of the teacher but also on the effectiveness of the materials selected. Combining both helps us to reach our goal—helping our students improve their English language skills.

References

- Dale, P., & Wolf, J. C. (2013). *Speech communication made simple—Book 2* (4th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, Inc.
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- Van Houten, J. B. (2006). Turning a new light on assessment with LinguaFolio. *Learning Languages*, 12(1), 7–10.

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