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## **TEACHING PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS ONLINE TO ESP STUDENTS**

*The paper aims at presenting the results of successful implementation of traditional public speaking assignments in the full absence of a face-to-face classroom within the scope of teaching ESP. The instruction was conducted through Moodle and Zoom. Although the paper also addresses the challenges of practical skill development through online media, it emphasizes the importance of digital public speaking as a newly-emerging phenomenon and suggests that hereafter the instruction of public speaking to ESP students should take place in a blended environment including traditional classroom and online technology.*

**Key words:** *ESP, public speaking, verbal and non-verbal delivery, audience engagement, video-conferencing platforms*

In recent decades, the rapid developments in ICTs have provided humanity with new opportunities and solutions, especially in the field of education. Today, distance is no longer a problem: people can take practically any course or receive high-quality education in another part of the world while sitting in their homes. In addition to distance learning opportunities, universities around the world have also been offering hybrid courses combining traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with components of online teaching. Innovative learning management systems (LMS) have further emerged to allow the entire educational process to take place in the virtual environment. This timely revolution enabled us to face the ongoing health crisis that hit the world in 2019.

The forced lockdown came as a surprise. Schools and higher educational institutions were quick to respond by modifying their teaching techniques and switching to various online communication media. Yerevan State University, which had undertaken the e-learning initiative by introducing Moodle LMS several years ago and had been offering professional development courses to train the teaching staff, was relatively prepared to take the challenge. Yet, the transition to teaching online full time was difficult.

Having long-term experience in providing one-to-one tutoring services to individuals via Skype, I had a clear idea of what online teaching is. I could visualize how to organize classes to help my students acquire the necessary language skills. But it was daunting to imagine what it would be like to teach a whole group of 20-25 university students simultaneously. Moreover, I didn't see how developing public speaking skills would fit into the overall syllabus. Public

speaking has been an integral part of my ESP teaching strategy over the years of working with university students. It directly involves face-to-face interaction and awareness of body language, which are unthinkable in a remote virtual environment. For the lack of a newly structured approach, I eventually had to apply my traditional teaching methods to the Moodle and Zoom format. In the meantime, I reviewed some published research results and here is what I found out.

Various scholars have carried out a comparative analysis of learning outcomes in online and face-to-face sections of public speaking courses. An experiment conducted by professors of speech communication at West Texas A&M University in 2004 revealed no significant difference in how students perform in public speaking after taking a course online or in a face-to-face classroom. Both groups of students participating in the experiment “scored equally well on their speeches”. Moreover, “online students reported higher levels of communication apprehension than did the f2f students /Hanson et al, 2004: 1, 8/. These results are confirmed in later studies as well /Linardopoulos, 2010: 199/.

Thus, in this paper I will share my first-hand experience of successful implementation of traditional public speaking assignments in a fully online setting within the scope of teaching English for Political Science and International Relations. I will also address the challenges of practical skill development through online media, namely, via Moodle LMS and the Zoom video-conferencing platform.

Public speaking is one of the crucial competences students majoring in Political Science, International Relations and Diplomacy need to obtain. It has long been an inseparable part of the ESP course syllabus, where it is viewed as a vocational learning requirement. In fact, “effective public speaking and interpersonal communication skills are considered by many human resources managers to be essential for prospective employees” /Linardopoulos, 2010: 199/. However, the ESP course is not aimed at teaching the art of oratory per se but only uses it as a channel for developing presentation and oral language skills, so our students’ mentality dimly perceives what public speaking constitutes and what is expected from them. As a rule, most students in Armenian universities approach speechmaking as an activity of reading from paper or elaborately designed slides (or, at best, uttering a memorized text) in front of their peers while making no effort to *speak* and employing no expressiveness, artistic ability and emotionality.

In the contemporary world, public speaking knowledge and skills are continuously growing in importance. Virtually any professional has to face the challenge someday. Therefore, specialized foreign language classes are to provide expertise far beyond the mastery of a target language if they intend to ensure efficacy of specialized education. The art of rhetoric is a major and independent discipline, and, admittedly, it would be infeasible to focus closely on all the details

during a foreign language course. Nonetheless, learners ought to be adequately informed about what makes an effective speech or presentation, and I devote a considerable portion of time to refine their skills.

Although public speaking has originated as a “face-to-face exchange between a designated speaker and an audience” /Mapes, 2019: 178/, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is increasingly relying on ICTs. Today, digital public speaking is a newly-emerging phenomenon, which means the contemporary language instructor should adjust its rules to online environment. Before addressing the changing media of communication, let us consider the process of building the necessary skills in a traditional classroom because it will lend important insights into the challenges raised by online communication environment.

My action plan for preparing students of Political English to make rousing speeches and presentations includes the following stages. The first thing to do is to briefly introduce them to the basic components: content, structure and delivery /Verderber et al., 2018: 13-14/. For the first-year students, **content** is whatever they find interesting and exciting to talk about; for seniors, content is largely political. The topics may cover a wide range of information. Freshmen may want to report social, cultural, fashion, art, sports or celebrity news, where the vocabulary is more or less familiar to them, or they may choose to give an informative talk on broad topics like hobbies, pets, kindness, travel, traditions, characters, books, movies, etc., or, if their language proficiency level allows, express themselves sharing their own cherished thoughts and beliefs. News stories for senior students cover political, historical, economic, financial, commercial events from audio-visual or digital foreign media, while personal interest topics deal with narrow political content varying from reports on issues of concern (such as corruption, political decision-making, lobbying, manipulation, and so on) to self-made persuasive speeches (as part of role-plays or simulations I shall discuss later).

**Structure** basically means dividing the message into introduction, body and conclusion. Students are taught to start with presenting themselves and welcoming the audience. Then they introduce the topic by making a thesis statement, providing background knowledge and/or explaining why the topic is appealing and important. They should clearly see their goal and structure their talk around it. For the beginners, the purpose may be entertaining or informative, whereas for the seniors it is strictly informative or persuasive. The main body of the speech is structured logically so as to achieve the goal and it presents facts, reasons and arguments respectively. In the end, the talk is followed by a question-and-answer session. Furthermore, I get my students to understand the difference between a presentation/report/ lecture/ informative talk and a persuasive speech. The structure (and content) of the latter is somewhat different: including the same three components, the orator enjoys freedom to express his/her creativity, eloquence and powers of

persuasion, and s/he may not necessarily give any background information or be asked questions.

Structure also implies making smooth and logical transitions between ideas. Therefore, students study a list of useful signpost words and phrases and are encouraged to use them in their speech.

Timing is an important part of structure, as well. Most real-world conferences, meetings and other public gatherings set strict regulations on timing, and hence students should get accustomed to speaking in a fixed time frame. However, imposing time constraints in the initial phase of the learning process would mean causing additional fear of speaking in public, not to mention speaking in a foreign language. Thus, although I encourage the beginners to be brief, I allow them enough time to end their talk.

**Delivery** demands special attention. It is probably the most powerful component of speechmaking. Poor delivery can ruin a speech, while an efficient one can help the weaknesses in the content and structure remain unnoticed. Experts in speechmaking state that “effective speakers are conversational, intelligible, poised, and expressive in their delivery” /Verderber et al., 2018: 14/. But in an ESP class, I target verbal fluency (using a foreign language confidently), non-verbal competence (using voice and body language to communicate the message) and poise (assurance in front of the public). All the three elements require meticulous preparation, rehearsals and practice. As different from a class in rhetoric, where participants will only need to polish their native language skills, students in an ESP class should take pains to build enough knowledge and develop language fluency. Needless to say, this work extends well up to the end of the course. Hence, ways of achieving verbal fluency in speechmaking are not considered in this paper. Rather, I concentrate my efforts on building my students’ confidence and raising their awareness of non-verbal codes.

There are many instructional video and audio recordings on textbook CDs and YouTube giving advice on how to free oneself of the fear of public speaking. We watch and listen to them carefully, but this is easier said than done. Apart from insufficient language skills hindering autonomous language production, lack of confidence can be the result of many extra-linguistic factors, such as age, upbringing, inexperience, character, etc. And, after all, not everyone is a born orator. Lack of confidence leads students to monotonously going off script throughout their performance or reciting a fully memorized speech thus failing to grab the audience’s attention. No one in the classroom benefits from such a presentation: language skills do not develop, interest in the topic is not aroused, no questions arise, and no learning objectives are achieved.

Over the years I worked out strategies for overcoming this challenge. First, I have my students watch real speeches of real orators, statesmen, community

leaders, etc. (especially those on TED Talks), and then we analyze them in terms of content, structure and delivery. Some are eloquent and rousing; others are less inspiring and influential, while quite a few are poor and unimpressive for some reason or other. When students identify other speakers' strengths and weaknesses, they involuntarily adopt approaches to the do's and don'ts of rhetoric and develop their own manners, styles and unique solutions. The next step is to allow learners to make their own bold attempts. Here, rather than assigning them strict topics, I encourage speaking about their deeply-held beliefs, something that comes from the bottom of their hearts. At this stage I do not focus on faults but urge them to 1) be enthusiastic, spontaneous and share their ideas impromptu instead of memorizing ready-made texts; 2) prepare shorter speeches (even one- or two-minute appeals) in order to facilitate delivery; 3) move around the classroom and feel relaxed; 4) speak at a slow pace in order to assist language production and ensure intelligibility for listeners. The audience's responsiveness is guaranteed!

After this stage is successfully passed through, which means the students have somewhat raised their self-esteem and broken stereotypes, many of them demonstrate a desire to make more speeches. As described earlier in this paper, they gradually grow from delivering their own ideas to reporting on complex political theories and events. However, with the increasing difficulty rises the need for full memorization or dependence on printed texts or presentation slides. How then can visual contact be established with the audience? When students read throughout the presentation, their delivery is automatically impaired in terms of other non-verbal signals too – gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, pitch, volume and rate.

At this stage, the only solution is to encourage students to 1) prepare a short outline of the presentation and notes containing important names, dates, terms instead of the complete text; 2) memorize the key points and examples so that they can look up at their classmates to maintain a link; 3) establish rapport by asking them questions or engaging them otherwise; 4) improvise using their own mental resources if they stumble or lose the train of thought. But will these techniques be workable in a virtual classroom?

When presenting online, whether for reaching global audiences or as part of a foreign language class, many principles of conventional speechmaking apply. Most importantly, online public speaking "should be well-prepared, organized, well-reasoned, and well-rehearsed" /Mapes, 2019: 179/. This includes all the aspects discussed above. What is somewhat different is the delivery process. In a digital performance verbal delivery should be enhanced to compensate for partial loss of non-verbal information. "Your vocals overlay a slideshow and your body isn't visible to an audience. Verbal enunciation, punctuation, rate, and pauses become key to maintaining your audiences' attention" /Ibid: 181/. In addition, "in face-to-

face settings, we must perceptively adjust to the non-verbal reaction of our audience members as we speak to ensure they are getting the message we intend. When delivering our message virtually, we must devise alternative ways to check for mutual understanding” /Verderber et al., 2018: 4/. In these conditions, building rapport with the audience by engaging them through questions or other forms of interaction proves absolutely crucial, even if we are just asking them to raise hands to show agreement /Farland, 2020/. Therefore, if the bandwidth allows, it is highly desirable for the students to have their cameras on, which will also keep them more or less alert.

Still, the body language is evident to the viewers as long as the webcam settings allow demonstrating the larger part of the speaker’s body. Some scholars and practising online instructors even recommend that students give a talk while standing and moving, just as they would do at a classroom presentation. At the same time, facial expressions, voice variations and eye contact remain essential non-verbal means of communication. The former two reveal the speaker’s enthusiasm and vigour, thus sustaining the viewers’ interest, and, while eye contact through the webcam does not fully replace directly facing up to the audiences, it is the only way to ensure silent connection with them. If our goal is to adjust online classroom speechmaking to realistic scenarios, we have to properly guide the students through the peculiarities of digital public speaking.

Digital media can both promote speechmaking and impede it. Thus, speaking into the camera can cause as much tension as facing up the audience in the classroom. On this count, the feelings from online presentation are similar to ones we experience in a real public speaking setting, and thus we learn to overcome our fears /Ellsworth, 2019/. On the other hand, despite the alienation from the camera, many students find speaking on the webcam easier than performing from behind the podium in a traditional classroom. One reason is that they are comfortably seated in front of their home computers. Another is that they feel free to go off their scripts (from the computer screen) thinking that nobody will notice. This is a misconception, though, and your students should know about it! Instead, having the speech outline on the table to cast an occasional glance at will appear perfectly natural. A different problem is that some learning platforms do not allow demonstrating visual aids and the speaker simultaneously, so students (even diligent ones) may be tempted to take advantage of this feature. Fortunately, the settings on the BigBlueButtonBN – Moodle’s videoconferencing tool – and Zoom can be adjusted so that, when sharing the screen, the speaker can appear live to both the peers and the teacher. Depending on the speaker’s preferences, peer questions, comments and suggestions can be raised as the speech ends or accompany the speech via chat so the speaker can address them immediately.

Under these circumstances, a peer assessment form /Karapetyan, 2012: 195/ proves beneficial to both the speaker and the viewers. Students give feedback on the performance by assessing the use of the listed verbal and non-verbal signals (e.g., Were they used excessively or moderately/appropriately?) and answering a number of questions related to the content and structure (e.g., Did the speech grab your attention?). The completed form can be submitted via a personal chat. Thus, each speaker gets enough feedback to improve the performance for the next time. For anonymous submission, it is the teacher who should send the peers' assessment forms to the target speaker. I encourage my learners to use these forms for self-assessment as well, when they prepare for the subsequent presentations. To do this, they should video-record themselves (on their smartphones or directly on Moodle) and playback the video viewing themselves as audience members. Self-critique is definitely a powerful method of active learning.

Moreover, digitally recorded speeches can serve effectively in another way. Although presenting synchronously is what each learner will need in his/her future career, it works best for some students to have their speech video-recorded in advance, i.e., asynchronously. In a live presentation, students have only one chance to make a good impression and get their message across /Mapes, 2019: 179/. When recording themselves, they can make as many attempts as needed to get the desired result before sending the teacher a final copy. One of the drawbacks of this approach, though, is that the teacher is usually the only viewer and evaluator. As an option, the recorded speech can be shared with classmates on Moodle Forum or on YouTube. Asynchronous presentations also yield to live performance in that “you lose the ability for audiences to provide you with live feedback, so you may be unaware if there’s a key question or issue that audiences need answered... In synchronous speaking, you may be more comfortable in adopting and applying face-to-face public speaking strategies, including integrating live audience feedback” /Mapes, 2019: 180/.

By far the best approach to teaching public speaking to ESP students, which has also worked successfully in a real classroom and can be easily transferred to the digital medium, is group presentation. Creating virtual teams beyond the class hour is realizable and constructive. Teamwork keeps its potential for building the spirit of community and collaboration and it also helps the difficult task of speechmaking seem easier and more manageable than in case of working on one's own.

All the aforesaid describe ideas on the speaker's preparation. At the same time, the role of the audience members should not be underestimated. An efficient audience contributes constructive feedback both by their nonverbal signals in the presentation process, the questions raised and the final verbal assessment. However, it is not easy to ensure responsiveness of the class. In a traditional classroom, the audience is often inattentive and irresponsive, as students often behave

uncontrollably chatting with their peers, distracting the speaker and interrupting the speech. By contrast, in a virtual classroom chatting seems to be eliminated but digital format brings about other manifestations of inattentiveness. For instance, some students may be busy doing other things, which will remain unnoticed. This problem has led me up to offering the audience another form to fill out during each presentation. The form is posted on the course page beforehand to encourage the students other than the speaker to become active listeners/participants by jotting down the arising questions and ideas. It includes the following points:

*Topic:*

*Main idea/purpose:*

*Supporting idea 1:*

*Supporting idea 2:*

*Question 1:*

*Question 2:*

*Suggestions/recommendations:*

Another common challenge that discourages the class from getting involved as enthusiastic listeners is abundance of unfamiliar words and terms in a speech. Students get disinterested if they do not understand what is being reported to them. And if their non-verbal behaviour in a face-to-face classroom could reveal confusion, frustration or loss of attention, the online conditions complicate the speaker's perception of these silent messages. Previously, I had my speakers prepare handouts with the glossary of the key words and terms. Today, the technology-assisted online class opens broader opportunities for both the presenter and the audiences. The glossary can be easily shared on one part of the screen with the other demonstrating photos, videos and other visuals. Looking at different types of information on the screen will also contribute to developing the listeners' multitasking skills. Alternatively, concerned students can quickly access their preferred online dictionaries.

A stimulating supplement to online public speaking, inapplicable in conventional classroom settings, is creating a suitable digital background or banner against which the speaker will be giving his/her talk. This function is very simply enabled in the ZOOM, where you can insert an appropriate photo, video or animation from a proposed list to match your presentation topic or to create an appropriate mood. It is also possible to upload images from your computer by clicking the + above the available backgrounds. In fact, for some speeches the right background can replace presentation slides: overusing visuals can divert the audience and ruin the verbal message. If slides are necessary, then the background

can still be viable communicating the key idea or serving neutral functions like reminding about the topic or changing the look of the virtual room. It can also be useful for the online teachers to create an aura of professionalism. Currently, the function can be carried out through personal computers or the latest iPhone models only, but it is definitely worth considering for a realistic and creative presentation. Regrettably, not all educational or videoconferencing platforms provide this feature.

Both in real life and in the classroom, public speaking can take different forms and pursue different goals. Thus, during a *press conference* or a simulation game, the organization representatives deliver a public address on the topic of the press conference and then give a one-on-one *interview* to an inquisitive journalist. During team *debates* each member makes a short speech in favour or against the proposed resolution. *News broadcasting* and *commentary* are a different form of public speaking where the reporter addresses broader audiences through digital media. Finally, professionals conducting *webinars* give informative talks to interested individuals through the Internet. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all these types of speech tend to be delivered in digital formats, and hence the pressing need for online training.

The above mentioned scenarios can all be played out during an English class. Some require longer preparation, while others are easy to construct in a few minutes (using the breakout rooms). Thus, a press conference planning requires dividing the class into 2 groups – representatives of an organization (speakers) and journalists. Each group receives from the teacher a set of study materials and start preparing for their respective roles. The students in the former group should decide on the topic of the press conference and the organization character, design an organizational backgrounder, a press release, write biographies and speeches, etc.; the latter prepare questions for the speakers and for private interviews. A separate role is assumed by a moderator, who starts and ends the formal meeting. On the other hand, news broadcasting simulation can be done spontaneously with students working in groups of 2 or 3 (a news announcer, a foreign correspondent and an event bystander). In these simulation games, students apply their knowledge to real-life vocational situations, gain practical know-how in dealing with their future profession-related issues, and developing critical thinking and language skills at the same time.

To conclude, real-life public speaking is increasingly relying on digital technologies. All professionals who are to deal with live audiences, including political actors and commentators, public officials, diplomats, news reporters, business analysts, professors, to name just a few, have to master online broadcasting techniques and learn to navigate effectively through videoconferencing tools like Zoom, Skype Meet Now, Google Hangouts, Google

Meet and others. Today's need for education to switch to a digital mode is in tune with the demand for public figures to address audiences online and globally. And although online classes cannot fully replace live face-to-face communication, learning the art of speechmaking online actually yields benefits to future orators. Ideally, the instruction of public speaking during ESP courses should adopt a blended teaching/learning approach combining traditional classroom and online technology.

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**Մ. ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏՅԱՆ – Հանրային խոսքի հմտությունների առցանց դասավանդումը՝ անգլերենը հապուկ նպատակներով ուսումնասիրող ուսանողների համար.** – Հոդվածի նպատակն է ներկայացնել հանրային խոսքի հմտություններ ձևավորող ավանդական հանձնարարությունների՝ անգլերենը հատուկ նպատակների համար առցանց դասընթացին արդյունավետ կիրառման արդյունքները: Ուսուցումը անցկացվել է Moodle և Zoom հարթակներով: Թեև հոդվածը անդրադառնում է առցանց եղանակով գործնական հմտություններ ձևավորելու դժվարություններին, այն կարևորում է թվայնացված հանրային խոսքը՝ որպես նոր առաջացող և արագ զարգացող միտում և

առաջ է քաշում մասնագիտացված անգլերենի դասերին հանրային խոսքը համակցված եղանակով դասավանդելու հարցը՝ համատեղելով ավանդական լսարանը և առցանց տեխնոլոգիաները:

**Բանալի բառեր.** անգլերենը հասունակաների համար, հանրային խոսք, խոսքային և ոչ խոսքային վարքագիծ, հանդիսատեսի ներգրավում, տեսաժողովների համար նախատեսված հարթակներ

**М. КАРАПЕТЯН – *Обучение навыкам публичной речи в режиме онлайн на курсах английского языка для специальных целей.*** – В данной статье рассматриваются процесс и результаты успешного применения традиционных заданий по обучению навыкам публичной речи в условиях полного отсутствия очных курсов английского языка для специальных целей. Обучение проводилось исключительно через Moodle и Zoom. В статье также выявляются трудности приобретения практических навыков в режиме онлайн. В то же время, подчеркивается важность публичных выступлений в цифровом формате как восходящей и перспективной тенденции. Следовательно, предлагается в дальнейшем проводить смешанное обучение навыкам публичной речи в рамках курса английского языка для специальных целей, сочетая обучение в традиционной аудитории и цифровые технологии.

**Ключевые слова:** английский язык для специальных целей, публичная речь, вербальное и невербальное поведение, вовлечение аудитории, платформы для проведения видеоконференций

**Ներկայացվել է՝ 31.08.2020  
Երաշխավորվել է ԵՊՀ Անգլերենի թիվ 2 ամբիոնի կողմից  
Ընդունվել է տպագրության՝ 20.11.2020**