

13 Awareness poster campaign for the development of presentation skills in Spanish

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Abstract

This paper describes a project-based oral activity trialled with Year 1 and Year 2 students of the Spanish Degree Programme at the University of York. The objective of the activity aimed to develop students' speaking confidence through the completion of an authentic task based on the concept of authentic assessment. This task was implemented during the academic year 2017-18 and consisted of students developing poster campaigns with a slogan and hashtag that they would subsequently justify during their presentation. The task had outstanding results as students benefited from practising a range of practical skills and reported it to be a very rewarding experience. As a result, it is intended that this activity will now be integrated in oral summative assessments for the modules in which this task was trialled.

Keywords: oral presentations, authentic assessment, professional skills, group assessment.

1. Introduction

The objective of the formative oral-based activity described in this paper was to encourage students to develop the precise, organised, and effective oral skills

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How to cite this chapter: López, E. L. (2019). Awareness poster campaign for the development of presentation skills in Spanish. In N. Becerra, R. Biasini, H. Magedera-Hofhansl & A. Reimão (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: a look at new trends* (pp. 115-122). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.32.908>

much valued in the current labour market. The task, set out for the core Spanish language modules in Years 1 and 2 of the Spanish Degree Programme at the University of York, involved the design of a fictitious advertising campaign by designing a poster accompanied by a slogan and a hashtag. Students not only planned and designed a poster campaign, but they also presented the rationale behind their project to the class audience. This second part requires the use of business pitch skills with a focus on persuasive language. Students were given flexibility to make use of a wide range of technological and social media tools, hence allowing them a wide range of creativity and individual skills.

By using a communicative language teaching approach, University of York tutors model the production of meaningful verbal communication. Students who attend Spanish language modules are fully immersed in the target language during contact times. This approach is also extended to other core modules of the Spanish degree programmes such as the Spanish Language and Society I and II modules. In this module, students are introduced to “a variety of written and aural materials”² to reinforce the development of linguistic competencies in order to achieve a high level of fluency and accuracy in the production of written and spoken Spanish.

Furthermore, students’ oral production in seminars is supported by continuous interaction between the tutor and students’ peers, who prompt them to use relevant discursive markers, debating phrases and conversational connectors, to name but a few linguistic characteristics. The existing literature has highlighted the positive effect of repetition on fluency and language acquisition. This leads to an increased rate of speaking, a greater level of vocabulary retention, and on building confidence (Brooks & Wilson, 2014). Also, Prichard and Ferreira (2014), by citing Baddeley (1990) and Logan (1988), highlight that repetition of a task allows for skills to move from controlled to automatic processing and that this has been proven to be the case for language learning in relation to accuracy and fluency.

2. <https://www.york.ac.uk/language/current/undergraduates/modules/2011-12/s12i/>

Another reason for starting this project was the increasingly fierce competition in the labour market requiring highly articulate graduates; nowadays numerous reports ([The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015](#); [World Bank, 2018](#); [World Economic Forum, 2016](#)) suggest that an effective use of the language has proven to be a powerful tool that makes individuals stand out. For example, in a US study, Sims [Peterson \(1997\)](#) found evidence that effective communication skills have significantly influenced employers' hiring decisions, especially in the last 30 years, and are therefore considered essential for success.

Finally, and central to this proposed project, is the concept of authentic assessment which entails the replication of tasks, challenges, and standards of execution carried out by real-life professionals ([Wiggins, 1989](#)). These “forms of assessment in which students are asked to perform ‘real-world’ tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills” ([Mueller, 2016](#) in [Thurab-Nkhosi, Williams, & Mason-Roberts, 2018](#), p. 652) support student confidence and course engagement. Furthermore, students are more able to use different types of skills and therefore improve their quality of learning and competencies ([Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995](#) in [Thurab-Nkhosi et al., 2018](#); [Wiggins, 1990](#)) and on top of this, their chances of becoming more employable ([Villarroel et al., 2017](#)).

2. Method

2.1. Task instruction

During one teaching week, 47 students were put in teams of three. They were instructed to design an awareness campaign on a social issue. Students could then embark on the task of designing a poster, a slogan, and a hashtag for the campaign on a social issue from a list of topics to choose from that were part of the modules' syllabi, for example, endangered languages, catcalling, and discrimination in Latin America. These topics were then presented in class. Subsequently, they pitched their poster in approximately five minutes with one student explaining the rationale for the whole campaign, another justifying the poster design, and the third mostly being responsible for answering questions from the audience.

It is worth clarifying three aspects related to the task; firstly, no specific grammatical target structures were required but emphasis was put on the need for the campaign to send an impactful message; secondly, choice of software for designing the poster was left at students' discretion. Finally, the fact that the roles assigned to the three members of the team were different meant that each student was going to invest more time and effort on a specific aspect of the project, therefore, they each developed specific skills. This, however, was not perceived as a problem given that students had to consider that in every day work, and that teamwork requires that people draw on diverse skills ([The Higher Education Academy, 2014](#)). Furthermore, the object of the evaluation (formatively at this trial stage) by means of the usual speaking skills criteria plus added criteria for poster design, was the outcome itself. This was a way to guarantee the reliability of individual contributions. Twenty percent of the total module mark was assessed through peer assessment.

2.2. Preliminary work

Students received theoretical and practical preparation on the key skills for the development of this task prior to the release of the final task instruction. Information was presented to them and examples of advertising campaigns and awareness posters were then discussed in class. Some of the other knowledge and abilities required for the task had already been covered as part of the course syllabus, for example, presentation structure, the use of body language in presentations, etc. In particular, the students were prepared with the following skills in preparation for the task:

- objective of advertising campaigns,
- poster design,
- characteristics of effective posters (clear and easy to read, prioritising information, sending a clear message, not needing verbal explanation, correct grammar and spelling, inviting to viewer),
- visual presentation of argument,

- producing focussed, purposeful, meaningful, and structured business-like pitches and viewpoints, typically following the Point + Evidence + Explanation method, an essay-writing technique widely used in UK GCSE and A Level education (both in writing and orally),
- effective pitching skills by considering audience, location, duration, structure, message, body language, etc., and
- use of persuasive language.

3. Results and discussion

After the presentations had been assessed, students were surveyed for feedback on their perceptions of this authentic task and out of 47 students, 26 responded. In terms of the usefulness of the task, the general perception of students was that they found the task useful and enjoyable. The evaluation showed that 60% agreed that the exercise helped them gain specific knowledge on a wide range of language and employability skills; 35% ‘more or less’ agreed to this, and 5% reported not finding it particularly useful.

When asked to provide details as to the type of knowledge and skills they believed to have gained, it was clear that skills gain was predominant in comparison with the actual knowledge gained. The key skills that they mentioned were in order of recurrence: (1) team skills by doing group work, i.e. dividing up tasks, organisational skills; (2) presentation skills, i.e. summarising information, speaking in public; (3) designing posters, i.e. using eye-catching, effective, and emotive images; (4) conveying impactful messages; and (5) learning thematic-specific vocabulary in Spanish. In terms of knowledge, the great majority found in-depth research on specific themes to be useful.

A powerful message was that 85% of students responding reported that they had enjoyed working on this assignment. This shows that engaging with realistic tasks and letting learners showcase their varied skills contributes

to student engagement, especially if they value these activities as similar to the ones they have to complete in their future jobs (Villarroel et al., 2017). Furthermore, 35% found this undertaking challenging, 40% found it dynamic, and 10% perceived it as exhausting. What students mostly enjoyed included (in terms of recurrence): (1) designing the poster, (2) designing the slogan, (3) reading about the topic, and (4) presenting the poster. Having the presentation part not at the top preferred activity does not come as a surprise given the high levels of anxiety that language oral tests provoke in students, according to the literature (Philips, 1992; see also Aleksandrzak, 2011; Scott, 1986; Von Worde, 2003). Interestingly, what they enjoyed the least included: (1) working in groups as students found it difficult to find enough time outside class or due to individual workload, (2) trying to fit all relevant information into a poster format, and (3) the presentation itself, which confirms the literature on second language test anxiety.

Other findings include that in the open comments section of the feedback, students have felt empowered after carrying out this task as they were able to showcase their creativity and unique skills. For instance, many had the opportunity to use their skills with digital tools, as the majority of groups used Publisher for the poster design while the rest used Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. Derived from that, students also reported to have achieved greater class cohesion and increased peer interaction, not only with their group members but also with the rest of the class as they were all in the same challenging situation.

4. Conclusion

The idea of introducing a project-based learning activity for students originated from the need of tasks based on real-life professional practice. Many graduates go on to find employment in the advertising or marketing sector where pitching skills are essential, and as most employers value communication skills and team work, the design of an awareness poster and articulating the rationale behind it seemed ideal.

The survey at the end of the task showed that it allowed them to gain both knowledge and skills and that they find it highly enjoyable as an assessment. While many found group work a useful skill to develop, they also found the experience challenging due to having to negotiate not only skills but also schedules with their peers. All in all, various skills in the target language were gained such as summarising, organising, and delivering clear and meaningful information within a specific amount of time.

Also, students reported that they enjoyed planning and executing the task because they felt that they gained new knowledge and professional skills. More importantly, the great majority reported feeling empowered as they were able to showcase individual skills and strengths to their peers. For these reasons, this task will be embedded into the summative oral exams of the modules described of the Spanish core modules in Year 1 and Year 2, and as the assessment has been welcomed widely, other language modules in the Department of Language and Linguistics will replicate this exercise in the short term.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

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Innovative language teaching and learning at university: a look at new trends
Edited by Nelson Becerra, Rosalba Biasini, Hanna Magedera-Hofhansl, and Ana Reimão

Publication date: 2019/05/06

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-36-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-37-5 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-35-1 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, UK: British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2019.
