

Using Public Speaking Tasks in English Language Teaching

The purpose of this article is to provide suggestions for using public speaking tasks in English language teaching (ELT) and to highlight some of their many advantages. Let me first describe what I mean by public speaking tasks: these include any task where the participant addresses an audience orally. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on two types of these tasks: student presentations and debates. Student presentations may consist of either individual or group speeches based on class lessons or outside projects. Debates are interactive tasks, and usually require a greater degree of organization. They can be held with two or more students who take turns speaking on either side of an issue. The public speaking tasks suggested here rely on authentic language use and communication toward an audience. In this article, I will introduce advantages of using these tasks in the language classroom, describe their implementation, and provide examples of their use.

The advantages of public speaking

There are several clear advantages to using public speaking tasks in ELT. I have highlighted three that I think are most noteworthy: practice with all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), development of critical thinking skills, and improved learning. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

Advantage 1: Public speaking provides opportunities to practice all four language skills.

Presentation and debate tasks utilize and strengthen listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. There is naturally a strong focus on speaking; spoken language is vital in delivering a clear, coherent speech. Peer evaluation can promote careful listening, which becomes especially meaningful during debates if participants are required to take notes and respond to their classmates' speeches. Additionally, students will develop strong reading and writing skills during task preparation. Students must skim and scan a wide variety of sources and

read key materials in depth as they search for information to use in presentations or debates. Writing practice is highlighted as learners take notes and complete argumentative essays in preparation for oral presentations.

Advantage 2: Public speaking supports development of critical thinking skills.

Presentation and debate tasks promote a variety of critical thinking skills in addition to specific language skills and strategies. While preparing for a public speaking assignment, students are asked to develop a position, explore beliefs and theories, analyze arguments, evaluate the credibility or bias of a source, and distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. Students are encouraged to question deeply, develop and assess solutions to problems, compare and contrast, make inferences, recognize contradictions, and explore implications and consequences. The insights gained during preparation activities allow students to approach the materials with a critical eye, and these skills can be transferred to new materials and contexts.

Public speaking tasks require students to conduct research and develop support for their arguments. Once the students have identified a topic of interest, they may carry out an extensive search of materials using library and online search tools. Then the students skim, scan, or read select articles to gain knowledge of their topic. Alternatively, students may tap local resources for useful information. Public meetings, newspapers, interviews, and narratives are great sources of evidence for both presentations and debates. This process promotes strong organizational skills and encourages students to discriminate between primary and secondary information. Students can also learn about bias in reporting and the difference between interesting trivia and important facts. As students bring several sources of information together, they must synthesize their findings into cohesive arguments with logical support. Furthermore, this information will need to be integrated into the students' existing knowledge base so they can make sense out of what they find in order to develop clear presentations.

Advantage 3: Public speaking promotes learning.

Presentations are an ideal way for students to display their knowledge. Through their presentations, students are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. This type of task pushes students to synthesize knowledge from a variety of sources and to take on a teaching role by explaining their topic to the rest of the class. This kind of self explanation has been found to correspond with higher levels of comprehension and conceptual understanding (Chi et al. 1994). Students learn more through having to explain information to others. Additionally, planning for presentations (and potential questions from peers) leads to deeper processing and a more complete understanding of the content.

These three advantages accompany both presentation and debate tasks. Debate tasks require more planning and involvement than presentations but are well worth the effort. In preparing for a debate, students practice reading and note-taking skills, and construct written arguments. Debate preparation also requires extensive collaboration and cooperation among teammates as they collect information and develop ideas. Whether you choose to include student presentations or debates in your curriculum, your students will certainly reap the benefits of integrated skills practice, critical thinking practice, and improved learning. Students will gain confidence in speaking and will learn to express themselves in clear and articulate ways.

Using public speaking tasks in the classroom

Both presentation and debate tasks require students to research, demonstrate, and review language and content. The following is a description of each of these phases, followed by a brief discussion of the assessment of public speaking tasks.

Research phase

During the research phase, students are asked to develop an argument and search for information to support their position. Thus students utilize reading strategies as well as library and interview skills. Note-taking is made more meaningful as it is used for individual research goals. During this phase,

students must anticipate and research various perspectives to prepare for questions and opposition to their arguments. A graphic organizer is a good way for students to clarify what they know and what they want to find out, and it can help students prepare for presentations and debates.

While preparing for public speaking tasks, students also gain conceptual knowledge rather than simply memorizing facts. Conceptual knowledge refers to an integrated network of knowledge, where students understand how pieces of information relate to one another. Students need to synthesize information from a variety of sources and integrate it into their existing background knowledge. Individual students must take the information gathered through this research and collaboration and then prepare written speeches for presentation. Students can take part in group or class discussions, share ideas, and resolve conflicts. Written essays can be developed through a process approach, allowing for additional collaboration between students and their teacher and/or peers.

Demonstration phase

The demonstration phase allows students to share their knowledge and hard work. There is a natural focus on language because students want their arguments to be understood. Immediately following the public speaking task is a good time to open the floor to class discussion. Students may answer questions about their own presentation or debate and also respond meaningfully to others. Public speaking provides students with a forum to express their ideas and demonstrate their knowledge to both peers and instructors.

Review and reflect phase

The final phase of presentation and debate activities is the review and reflect phase. This is an important and sometimes overlooked stage of public speaking tasks. One way students can reflect and focus on their language use is by recording their presentations and using these recordings for self assessment. If public speaking tasks are used repeatedly, each activity could be added to the same tape throughout the term. In this way, students would have an opportunity to view their progress and notice gaps in their language develop-

ment. Students sometimes do not realize just how far they have come. Providing an audio or video record of student presentations and debates allows students to recognize the progress they have made.

Following public speaking tasks it is useful to ask students to reflect on what they have learned and how their opinions and knowledge may have changed as a result of the information presented. Reflection can be facilitated through class discussion or a short individual paper. This is a powerful lesson in critical thinking and provides closure to the activity and topic area. Reflecting on what was learned can encourage metacognitive awareness and may lead to increased motivation and satisfaction in learning.

Assessment

Instructors may be inclined to avoid speaking tasks because they perceive them as difficult to assess. Depending on your learning goals, presentation and debate tasks can be assessed in several ways. You may find it useful to include both peer and self assessment, using a rubric to assess audio- and video-recorded speaking tasks. (See the Appendix for a rubric which may be used to assess student presentations.)

Some instructors may choose to assess the oral presentation less formally and instead concentrate on assessing the written work produced during preparation activities. The method of assessment used for a particular task will be strongly influenced by the goals and objectives of the instructor. Regardless of the type of assessment chosen, the preparation, practice, and focus on language will undoubtedly enhance student learning.

Teacher planning and preparation

Public speaking tasks may be central or supplementary to your lessons; there are advantages to including these activities at any level. There is no one set method or time commitment necessary for including these tasks in your curriculum. They can be used as a formal culminating activity or at the end of a single lesson to summarize information and make connections with previous work.

Presentations can be used to prepare students for later debates. The following six steps

can be used as an outline to develop student presentations in the classroom.

Step 1: Identify suitable topics. Depending on your learning objectives, the topics may be based on a lesson, unit, or individual project.

Step 2: Research the topic area. Students are asked to brainstorm and may be guided through the use of a graphic organizer. Research may take the form of interviews, review of media sources and textbooks, attendance at public meetings, library work, or internet searches.

Step 3: Organize and outline key points. Students are asked to critically review the information they have gathered, decide what is relevant, and synthesize new information into their existing knowledge.

Step 4: Write argumentative essays. In an argumentative or persuasive essay the author tries to prove or defend a point, rather than simply providing information. The written work may be done as an in-class exercise or assigned as homework. Early drafts of the essay can be read by peers for additional feedback.

Step 5: Give oral presentations based on the essays. The teacher should describe the format and expectations of the presentations ahead of time (e.g., 10-minute presentations; the use of notes is permitted; students should practice vocabulary and be prepared for questions).

Step 6: Review and reflect. The review may take the form of a class discussion or a short reflection paper.

Teachers can be intimidated by the amount of organization and planning they anticipate with class debates, but it is important to remember that debates only need to be as formal and extensive as you want them to be. The planning and organizational phases of formal debates provide more extensive opportunities for a wide range of learning. You may have students prepare for a debate in order to synthesize information and conclude a unit, or you may begin a class with an impromptu debate to tap students' background knowledge and encourage them to start thinking about a topic. You can also put students in pairs for unstructured mini-debates as a class warm-up. A sample debate warm-up activity follows.

1. Write potential topics on strips of paper. The topics should be in line with your learning objectives. If you would like to use these debates to simply get students speaking, think of topics your students can have fun with (e.g., cats are better than dogs, or red is better than blue).
2. Number students off in pairs, so that each pairing has a first and second speaker.
3. Give each pair a strip of paper with a topic written on it.
4. Give the first speakers three minutes to tell their partners the reasons they support the topic on their paper. Then, give the second speakers three minutes to respond and provide arguments against the topic.
5. Finally, ask if any students were persuaded to change their minds based on their partners' arguments.

Using debates, you can introduce the class to controversial issues that produce opposing viewpoints and require students to recognize perspectives different from their own. The following steps may be used when including a longer and more formal debate task in the classroom.

Step 1: Identify suitable topics. Topics may be generated by the students or the instructor but must have opposing viewpoints.

Step 2: Identify a motion (or motions). The motion is the specific wording of the topic for the debate and appears in the form of a statement that students can agree or disagree with. Once the motion is set, each student will be assigned to one side of the issue.

Step 3: Research both sides of the issue. Graphic organizers may be useful in identifying what information is unknown. Students conduct research and sort through information to understand the arguments on both sides of the issue, using the techniques described above for presentation tasks.

Step 4: Develop arguments and counterarguments. A writing assignment may be used to develop arguments, and students can receive peer feedback by sharing their ideas in groups.

Step 5: Debate. The debates may follow a variety of formats. Speaking times, number of

speakers, and the emphasis on research may vary. Students should be prepared to answer questions and should practice key vocabulary ahead of time.

Step 6: Review and reflect. As a written or oral exercise, participants and observers may comment on the most persuasive arguments presented on either side of the debate.

Public speaking tasks in practice

In order to illustrate the use of student presentations and debates in ELT, I will describe these tasks within a thematic unit on democracy. This theme lends itself well to multiple perspectives. However, any topic that taps students' interest may be implemented.

Student Presentations

A thematic unit on democracy provides rich ground for presentation tasks. You can utilize the six steps presented earlier to develop student presentations on democracy.

Step 1: Identify suitable topics. As you discuss a unit on democracy, ask students to identify issues they find particularly interesting or relevant. For instance, a student who displays interest about rights and responsibilities might choose to present this topic to the class.

Step 2: Research the topic area. Once the students have decided on topics, have them brainstorm what they already know and what they want to know. In addition to the parameters of rights and responsibilities in a particular country, a student could search for information to compare and contrast perspectives on rights throughout the world and question when these concepts may come into conflict. Students can work independently or in groups to research their topics, depending on the amount of time you want to devote to the task. This is a good way to integrate research and reading skills into the unit.

Step 3: Organize and outline key points. One way to help students synthesize their

findings is by asking them to create a flow chart like Figure 1 to demonstrate the relationships between different pieces of information.

Step 4: Write argumentative essays. Each student will prepare a written argumentative essay about rights and responsibilities, organized to include his or her main points and supporting ideas, as developed in the previous steps.

Step 5: Give oral presentations based on essays. The presentations can be seen as the culminating activity for the unit, where students synthesize what they have learned and demonstrate their in-depth understanding of their topics. Students take on a teaching role as they demonstrate their expertise and share their research with classmates.

Step 6: Review and reflect. Following the presentations, ask the class to review and reflect on what was learned and what new questions have come up as a result of their research. Ask students to identify new information and comment on any part of the presentations they found interesting or that made them alter their perspective.

Debates

When planning class debates, it is very important to select topics that have supportable positions to argue on either side. Let's take the same example of rights and responsibilities using the six steps described earlier for developing debates. You would first brainstorm suitable topics for debate: ask the class for suggestions, write them on the board, and then guide the class in choosing a set of debatable topics. Then, identify the wording of a motion for each topic, such as "We should value human rights above all else." Next, assign students to either side of the issue and ask them to research the arguments for and against their side. Students can complete an organizer like the one below while they conduct research.

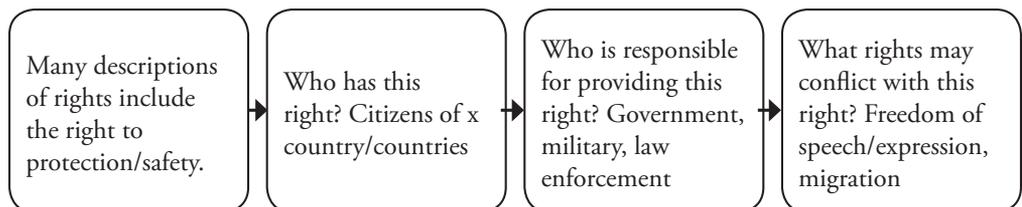


Figure 1: Flow chart organizing research on rights and responsibilities

Motion: We should value human rights above all else.	
Pro	Con
Human beings have certain rights which must be respected. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all humans have these rights from birth.	Do rights create unnecessary entitlement? Why should everyone have a right just because he or she is born?
Rights are based on the way people want to live.	There is no single definition or agreement about what human rights are. Different cultures could have extremely different interpretations of human rights.
The need for personal security and security of possessions is universal.	There is debate over what rights we have or should have. Some rights may come into conflict with others.

While developing arguments, students can collaborate and share ideas in groups to help identify the strongest arguments as well as the crucial weaknesses of a position. Students need to critically analyze all of the information presented and provide responses to counter-arguments. The teacher should introduce a format for the debate, which gives each student a set amount of time to present his or her arguments and respond to the arguments of the other side. An example of a possible debate format is shown below.

Speaker 1: Five minutes to present arguments for the value of human rights

Speaker 2: One minute of questions

Speaker 2: Five minutes to respond and present opposing arguments

Speaker 1: One minute of questions

Speaker 1: Five minutes to respond and summarize position

Speaker 2: Five minutes to respond and summarize position

Following the debate, students should reflect on what they have learned and on ways their opinions may have been reinforced or changed during the task. Students will soon realize that there are multiple sides to any issue. Debating a controversial topic encourages students to look beyond their own beliefs and recognize other viewpoints. Participating in a debate incorporates lessons on tolerance in a meaningful way.

Points to remember

The following guidelines will help in the development of public speaking tasks for any level.

1. Explicitly state your language and content objectives. Determine what skills and content you need to teach. Public speaking tasks may support many of your instructional goals; decide what you want to focus on so that the lesson does not become overwhelming.

2. Remember that topics which allow for student input are most effective because they increase motivation and allow students to have a stake in their own learning. Students do not need to have absolute free reign over their topic areas; they can be guided and supported in making choices that reflect the instructional content. The important point is that they have some sense of control over their learning.

3. Keep in mind that presentation and debate tasks are not limited to any one set of themes. These tasks can be used with many different content areas including literature, science, history, and current events (see Snider and Schnurer 2002 for additional content area debates). There is no limit to what you can do with public speaking tasks and the ways you can use these tasks to increase the students' engagement with the material.

4. Provide a variety of authentic resources. In order to prepare, you may conduct some personal research to familiarize yourself with the content and resources available. A familiarity with text resources will help you guide your students toward fruitful searches and

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suggest directions for their investigations. The Internet is a useful tool to expand the resources available to your students. If these resources are not available, you may have students draw on existing background knowledge, investigate issues within their community, or conduct local interviews. Part of the learning process involves sorting through different kinds of information and making decisions about what to include and exclude. You can provide materials in the classroom (texts, newspapers, or films) or use the information-gathering process as a lesson in library research, oral (interview) skills, or computer use.

5. Encourage students to be critical and to look at different sides of an issue. They should be prepared to answer questions from various perspectives and to challenge their own assumptions. Expose students to a variety of texts on the same topic and ask them to identify differences in the way the topic is presented. This will help launch a discussion on potential bias and source credibility. Encourage questioning at every stage of the task.

6. Remember to have fun. Questions, disagreements, and moments of confusion all contribute to critical thinking. As long as the students are engaged with the content and are using language in meaningful ways, they are learning.

Conclusion

Public speaking tasks are an easy way to enhance language learning. As students participate in lively presentations and debates, they develop increased motivation and engagement with the materials. Language skills will improve because students are using language in meaningful ways for specific purposes and are working toward personal goals. Students learn how to access information and gain knowledge. These are skills that can effectively transfer to future learning and employment contexts. Public speaking tasks empower students by allowing them to take charge of their own learning and to communicate their knowledge to others in authentic ways.

References

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- Snider, A., and M. Schnurer. 2002. *Many sides: Debate across the curriculum*. New York: International Debate Education Association.

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Appendix Student Presentation Rubric

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Language	(1-5 points each)
Vocabulary The vocabulary is appropriate for the speaker's level. There are no serious errors in word choice or form.	
Usage There are no serious errors in structure; the ideas are presented clearly.	
Intonation The pitch patterns and pauses are used effectively.	
Diction All phrases are spoken clearly; accent and syllable stress are used appropriately.	
Pace The speaker speaks at a good pace that is easy to listen to and comprehend.	
Content	(1-5 points each)
Organization The speaker is well prepared and the presentation is well organized.	
Introduction The speaker states the topic and previews the main points of the presentation.	
Body There is enough supporting information to fulfill the assignment. The information is relevant to the topic.	
Conclusion The presentation includes a summary statement and a review of the main points.	