

# **“WELCOME TO OUR SEMINAR MINICONFERENCE”: ANOTHER WAY OF PRACTISING PRESENTATION SKILLS**

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## **Abstract**

Developing students' presentation skills belongs to a syllabus of nearly every regular course of language training at universities. It has been part of the last semester of English for Lawyers at Masaryk University for more than a decade as well. To enhance the students' motivation to deliver a presentation of good quality and to increase the attention of listening students, I included presentations into a more complex activity of holding a miniconference. Within two seminars the students either presented legal topics or participated in organizing the conference. In my paper I describe and evaluate specific tasks set for the miniconference and show the students' feedback to this, hopefully, more realistic setting.

## **Introduction**

Developing students' presentation skills has become a necessary part of foreign language education at universities all over the world. Sometimes it is included within the courses of Academic English or English for Specific Purposes, or it can be offered as a separate course. At the Faculty of Law of Masaryk University, it is a part of continuous assessment whose successful completion is a necessary pre-condition for students before taking the examination.

Evaluation of students' presentation skills has become a regular practice; however, the instructions and procedures have been modified over the years. The last innovation involved incorporating presentations into a more complex task of organizing and attending a conference. After describing the common presentation methodology at the Faculty of Law and the motivation behind designing the conference activity, the paper explains the conference procedure, i.e. the division into particular stages and instructions for the tasks and subtasks, continues with evaluation of students' performance, presents feedback and concludes with suggestions for further improvements.

## **1 Overview of Presentation Practice within the Course “English for Lawyers”**

### **1.1 Description of the Course**

The course “English for Lawyers” is a compulsory 4-semester course for the students of the Faculty of Law, Masaryk University. It is taught in 90-minute seminars a week and there are about 18 - 20 students in a seminar group. The first three semesters are finished by a credit test; however, the students need to complete a continuous assessment system during the last semester and then they can take an examination.

### **1.2 Common Methodology on Presentation Skills**

Practising presentation skills has been a part of legal English syllabus at the Faculty of Law for more than ten years. The students practise their presentation skills during in-class minipresentations in the first three semesters. In the fourth semester they form groups of three and are asked to prepare a 15-minute presentation of high quality as a part of the continuous assessment system.

The students first enhance their presentation skills in the lessons and then work on their presentations in their groups out-of-class. The presentations are usually performed within the seminars: the lesson is begun with a presentation, which is then assessed by the teacher and the classmates in a written form, and the rest of the seminar continues as a regular lesson.

### **1.3 Involving the Audience**

To increase the involvement of the listening students, the presenters have to prepare an interactive task for the audience. It could be something traditional, such as a quiz and word puzzle, or something original, e.g. a piece of drama. The students can be very creative; however, they need to be trained how to work with the chosen interactive task smoothly and efficiently.

A later adjustment is posting the presentation abstracts into discussion forums and inviting comments from fellow students. Needless to say that although the majority of reactions are optimistic about the choice of topics and content of the abstracts, the students do not write only positive comments, they also express their doubts or criticism. The authors of abstracts then usually put more effort into delivering the presentation when they know about the expectation of the audience.

These additions resulted in the presentations being better prepared, which corresponds to the findings of De Grez et al. [1] that the audience involvement is considered important as research has shown that “students’ perception of peer assessment will influence their willingness to take into account the feedback generated by peer assessment and to actually do something with that feedback.”

### **1.4 Motivation for Further Modifications**

Even though the presentation quality had increased, some groups still did not perform well, and sometimes the students in the audience were “falling asleep”. The seminar management did not always work well either. The teacher knew that there was always the danger of the technology collapsing, the presentation part getting too long or being cancelled.

Last academic year I therefore decided to test a new methodology within which the class takers spend with presentations two weeks, i.e. the whole two 90-minute seminars, in the form of a miniconference. One half of the students presented their papers, which meant there were three presentations in one day. The other half participated in organizing the conference. The roles were switched in the other conference week. I tested this method in seven seminar groups.

The motivation behind the conference scheme was mainly twofold: to change the management of the seminars in which both the presentations and teaching took place, and to increase the engagement of the students, both when presenting and observing. The new method also brought other positive “side effects”. The students got the feeling of a “real” conference, practiced more soft skills and many of them enjoyed the presentations much more. This goes hand in hand with what also Pulko and Parikh [2] observed: “A successful training session must begin by creating a sense of urgency and somehow capturing the interest of the audience, usually by emphasising the importance of the topic and its relevance.”

## **2 The Miniconference Procedure**

The whole activity started by arranging 18 or 19 students of a seminar group into 6 presentation groups and then the groups negotiated a topic. The first set of tasks concerned abstracts. In the next step the students prepared the actual presentation and chose one of three

organisation tasks. They presented their topic in one conference day and in the other day they performed their organisation task.

## **2.1 Preparatory Stage – Presentation Skills Practice and Writing Abstracts**

The students recalled the rules of successful presentations and practised effective work with visuals and interactive tasks in the first lessons of the semester. At the same time they learnt the rules of abstract writing and each presentation group posted the title and abstract to the discussion forum. The teacher checked if there were no overlaps, or linguistic or content problems and set an individual task: the students were supposed to read the abstracts and everybody chose three which they commented on. The authors of the abstracts could then draw on the ideas from the comments.

## **2.2 Preparing the Presentation**

The presentation groups worked on their topics out of class; they were asked to prepare the paper for the seminar miniconference according to the following instructions:

- everybody from the group is equally involved when presenting the paper,
- the presentation lasts within the time limit: 15-20 minutes for groups of three, 20-25 minutes for groups of four,
- any topic concerning law is appropriate,
- the paper includes an interactive task for the audience,
- the presenters demonstrate an efficient use of visuals,
- the presentation as a whole is of high quality and pleasant to follow.

## **2.3 Organisation Tasks**

The organisation tasks were set as team work for the existing groups of presenters. Everyone was to participate in the chosen task; however, the division of labour was up to each group. The organisation tasks covered the following three options, the groups signed for one in the lesson two weeks before the first conference day: Invitation & Registration, Chairing & Time-keeping, Interviewing & Reporting. The students obtained the following instructions for their particular task.

### **A. Invitation & Registration**

This group was to prepare an invitation leaflet and to take care of the registration. They made up a text for the invitation: prepared an exact programme with the time slots, the titles of the presentations and the abstracts which they found in the discussion forum. They could quote any comments from the forum to make the invitation more attractive. The length of the invitation leaflet was maximum two pages, the students were to agree on its graphical design. They submitted the leaflet to the teacher two days before the conference.

At the registration, the group welcomed the participants, made sure everybody was signed against the registration list and handed over the copies with the invitation leaflets and evaluation sheets they had been given by the teacher.

### **B. Chairing & Time-keeping**

This group had a challenging task; they were responsible for smooth running without delays. They were to create a pleasant and professional atmosphere; they were asked to carefully

prepare the words for welcoming the audience, introducing the speakers and talks and closing each presentation and the whole conference as well.

As for the time keeping, the group had to decide in advance how they would clearly and politely signal the remaining time to the presenters and how they would react if a presenting group evidently got into time pressure.

### **C. Interviewing & Reporting**

The task of this group involved interviewing members of the audience and presenters, and preparing a conference report. The aim was to collect opinions on the presentations and summarize them in the report which could be either in a written, audio or video form. The students were supposed to state factual information, evaluate the conference and use opinions of at least two persons in the report. The length was set to 200-400 words, or 2-3 minutes.

## **2.4 Conference**

The teacher prepared copies of the invitation leaflet with the programme, the list of students for registration, evaluation sheets and some light refreshment to create a more realistic atmosphere. It was necessary to assist the organisation groups at the beginning to clarify all their subtasks.

The students registered at the registration desk, were given the programme and three evaluation sheets if they were not presenting, two of them if they were presenting. The chairing group opened the conference and everybody could focus on the first presentation and its evaluation.

The first two presentations were followed by a five-minute break during which the evaluation sheets were handed over directly to the speakers and the interviewing group could conduct interviews. After the last presentation, the chair closed the conference and invited everybody for a coffee break.

At the end of the second conference day, the students held a ballot to choose the best presentation out of the six they had seen. It was interesting to notice that nearly all the groups chose the presentation which included the most catchy, and thus memorable, parts, even though it was not the most professional one of all.

All the reporting groups opted for a written report which they submitted a few days after the conference had been held. All the invitation leaflets and reports were then posted on the “English for Lawyers” course websites.

## **3 Student Performance and Feedback**

During the conference activity the students practised language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), soft skills (e.g. presentation skills, team work, critical thinking, evaluating, creativity) and hard skills (gaining knowledge).

### **3.1 Presentations**

Generally, compared to the past years, the students showed more efforts to perform well, but they were also more nervous when presenting. Some of them displayed a really professional approach. I could identify the following strengths: the choice of topics, research, structuring the presentation, professional and pleasant introduction and effective visuals. Several weaknesses appeared in a number of presentations; some groups had problems with following all the instructions, keeping the attention of the audience in demanding parts, translating Czech facts into English (e.g. names of acts) or incorporating an effective conclusion.

### **3.2 Organisation Tasks**

The invitation leaflets were rather successful, the students could demonstrate their design and writing creativity; nevertheless, sometimes linguistic problems arose when students wanted to translate Czech metaphorical phrases into English word by word. The registration procedure became a pleasant and enjoyable beginning of a seminar conference.

The majority of chairing groups really prepared very well, which contributed to the pleasant atmosphere. They were also strict time-keepers, and thus none of the seminar groups were kept overtime.

The reports provided valuable feedback and the overall impression from them was mainly positive. Some groups submitted very well-written reports with many interesting insights; some groups reported only on factual information and quoted two or three opinions as stated in the instructions.

Most of the reporting groups were able to identify both good and bad points in the presentations. Let me quote two examples. The first one shows how the students were able to cope with a presentation of bad quality: "... the presentation focused on the differences between federal and national law. But as for me as an audience I must say that they failed miserably. Their presentation was really bad. They got way too much text on each slide and they were reading the whole thing from papers. I was really disappointed with this presentation, because they picked up a great topic..." The majority of reports were really enthusiastic and showed a good deal of appreciation of all the work involved as in the second sample: "We want to thank all the presenters that they spend their time to prepare such amazing and interesting presentations and we also want to thank all the organizers who took care of timekeeping, chairing and registration. It was a very successful event and may the gained experience and information be useful for all of you!"

### **4 Suggestions for Further Improvements**

Even though the activity can be considered as useful and successful, there is a number of issues which could be improved in the future. The most important are the following two: balancing the load of work involved in the three organisation tasks and eliminating the handicap of the first day presenters.

As far as the organisation tasks are concerned, although each task appeals to a different type of student, e.g. shy students who do not like standing in front of the audience would not opt for chairing, the reporting task obviously takes more time and effort than the other tasks. The balance could be achieved by adding another task to end the whole activity – writing a short self-reflection on practicing presentation skills. The minimum word limit for this task could be then scaled according to the organisation task, i.e. the reporting group will be set the shortest self-reflexion.

By including self-reflection we also make the whole presentation skills practice more valuable as self-reflection should be a necessary part of developing any skills. It will help students analyse their own behaviour and result in improved presentation performance as described in [1].

As for the other issue to be improved in the activity, if we compare the performance of the students on the first and second conference days, the latter were more relaxed because they already knew what to expect and what to pay attention to. This fact was also commented by reporters, e.g. 'I thought this second day of our mini-conference had been even better than the first one,' said one member of audience. We can only agree. Presenting groups knew from the

first day that the worst enemy was time. A possible way of solving this disadvantage is to provide clear instructions with examples of outcomes before the conference.

### **Conclusion**

The paper described a complex task-based activity of attending and organizing a conference, in which students write an abstract, comment on abstracts of other groups, prepare a group presentation, deliver the presentation, evaluate the other presentations and participate in the organisation of the seminar miniconference. The activity was tested with students of English for Lawyers, nevertheless, it can be adapted to various settings of both Academic language or Language for Specific Purposes.

The complex activity of miniconference proved to be beneficial for many reasons. It enhances the students' motivation to perform well; the students gain deeper practice of soft skills and develop their language skills in a more authentic setting. Also, more and more students realize that good presentation skills will be useful for the future. It is, however, advisable to introduce the reasons and future outcomes of the activity in a clear and comprehensive way at the very beginning. It became evident that many students were slightly scared of the tasks, even though they showed very good results later. As one of the reports mentioned: "In the end we can say that that the miniconference was not a bad idea after all. We learned how to present our ideas in front of audience and improved our skills. Furthermore, we were introduced to very interesting topics."

### **Literature**

- [1] DE GREZ, L.; VALCKE, M.; ROOZEN, I.: How effective are self-and peer-assessment of oral presentation skills compared with teachers' assessments? *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 13 (2), 2012, pp. 129-142.
- [2] PULKO, S.; PARIKH, S.: Teaching 'soft' skills to engineers. *International Journal of Electrical Engineering Education*, 2003, pp. 243-254

”WELCOME TO OUR SEMINAR MINICONFERENCE”  
ANEB STUDENTSKÉ PREZENTACE JAKO MINIKONFERENCE

Nácvik prezentačních dovedností je součástí téměř každého kurzu odborného či akademického jazyka na vysokých školách. Právnická fakulta Masarykovy univerzity není výjimkou, pro úspěšné zakončení posledního semestru Angličtiny pro právníky jsou studenti povinni přednést prezentaci odborného tématu. Pro zvýšení motivace, jak prezentujících, tak i studentů posluchačů, jsem prezentace zařadila do uceleného úkolu organizace a aktivní účasti na minikonferenci. Dva semináře tedy probíhaly formou konference, kterou studenti organizují či na ní vystupují s prezentací. Ve svém příspěvku se věnuji rozdělení jednotlivých úkolů a jejich zhodnocení z pohledu vyučujícího i zpětné vazbě ze strany studentů.

”WELCOME TO OUR SEMINAR MINICONFERENCE”  
ODER STUDENTISCHE PRÄSENTATIONEN ALS MINIKONFERENZ

Zur universitären fremdsprachlichen Ausbildung gehört untrennbar das Training von Fachsprache und akademischer Sprache. Die juristische Fakultät an der Masaryk-Universität in Brünn bildet darin keine Ausnahme. Zum erfolgreichen Abschluss des letzten Semesters im Fach Englisch für Juristen gehört die Präsentation zu einem fachlichen Thema. Zur Steigerung der Motivation sowohl der Vortragenden als auch der studentischen Zuhörerschaft habe ich eine Präsentationsaufgabe in die Gesamtaufgabenstellung eingefügt, und zwar die Organisation einer Minikonferenz und die aktive Teilnahme an derselben. Zwei Seminare liefen also in Form einer Konferenz ab, welche die Studenten organisiert hatten und bei der sie selbst mit einer Präsentation auftraten. In meinem Beitrag befasse ich mich mit der Verteilung der einzelnen Aufgaben und deren Bewertung aus dem Blickwinkel des Dozenten sowie mit der Rückmeldung von Seiten der Studenten.

“WELCOME TO OUR SEMINAR MINICONFERENCE”  
CZYLI PREZENTACJE STUDENTÓW W FORMIE MINIKONFERENCJI

Trenowanie umiejętności wygłaszania prezentacji stanowi element każdego kursu języka specjalistycznego lub akademickiego na uczelniach wyższych. Wydział Prawa Uniwersytetu im. Masaryka nie jest wyjątkiem, w celu pomyślnego zaliczenia ostatniego semestru Języka angielskiego dla prawników studenci mają obowiązek zaprezentowania specjalistycznego tematu. W celu podniesienia motywacji studentów, zarówno prelegentów, jak i słuchaczy, prezentacje ujęłam w kompleksowym zadaniu obejmującym organizację oraz aktywny udział w minikonferencji. Dwa seminaria odbywały się więc w formie konferencji, którą studenci organizują lub na niej wygłaszają prezentację. W swoim artykule skupiłam się na podziale poszczególnych zadań oraz na ich ocenie z punktu widzenia lektora i informacji zwrotnej od studentów.