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## A LECTURE PLAN FOR TEACHING BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS IN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT:

*DELIVERING PRESENTATIONS IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF A BUSINESSPERSON'S ROUTINE, ALONGSIDE ATTENDING MEETINGS, TELEPHONING OR EMAILING. HOWEVER, PUBLIC SPEAKING IS A MAJOR SOURCE OF ANXIETY FOR MANY PEOPLE AND ADDING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE INTO THE MIX WILL CERTAINLY UNNERVE EVEN THE MOST CONFIDENT OF PRESENTERS. THUS, A BUSINESS ENGLISH COURSE WOULD NOT BE COMPLETE WITHOUT AT LEAST ONE LECTURE DEDICATED TO PRESENTATIONS, USUALLY WITH A DUAL PURPOSE: CONSOLIDATING STUDENTS' GENERAL PUBLIC SPEAKING SKILLS AND ALSO EMPHASIZING THE SPECIFICITY OF BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. THIS PAPER PROVIDES AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT A FIFTY-MINUTE LECTURE AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL WOULD COVER IN TERMS OF GENERAL ASPECTS AND ALSO SPECIFIC POINTS (SUCH AS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, VOCABULARY, LEVEL OF FORMALITY) TO BE CONSIDERED WHEN PREPARING FOR A BUSINESS PRESENTATION.*

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**KEY WORDS:** BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS, ESP, BUSINESS ENGLISH, LECTURE PLAN, COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### INTRODUCTION

As with many professions, operating in the business field requires its own set of skills, which are more or less specific to the type of work that it involves. Attending meetings, negotiating or emailing, more often than not conducted in English as the lingua franca, are all central to business professionals nowadays, together with the ability to deliver successful presentations. Thus, the topic of public speaking has become an integrated part of language courses at university level, but with a multitude of students' learning goals (from improving accuracy to working on their fluency or spontaneity), it is important for the teacher to work on the various aspects that make up an effective presentation in English while also setting realistic goals, especially if this topic is limited to one or two lectures only[1]. This being said, Brieger also points out that, no matter the length of the course, learners should be given at least one opportunity to deliver a full presentation, so as to put into practice what had been previously covered[1].

As most trainers will agree, the basics of teaching presentations cover four main areas: content, structure, delivery and language[1, 2]. However, delivering presentations in a

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business context and in a foreign language will require some specific knowledge of three key aspects: language (particularly specialised vocabulary), the impact of cultural differences and mastering levels of formality. Alongside the technical aspects, trainers also need to consider the overall perception of students towards giving presentations, which are usually anxiety-inducing (as is the case with most people). Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem and Taqui reveal in a study on 500 female EFL college students that their difficulties in delivering presentations are related to three main areas: audience and instructors (including having a fear of being graded unfairly for the presentation and having too many people in attendance), personal traits (such as feeling anxious and embarrassed during presentations) and oral presentation skills (the need to read from notes, keeping with the time limit and needing to see others' presentations before delivering their own)[3]. These results show that there is a need for setting clear guidelines on how to best prepare for a presentation, but they also highlight the importance of following a model and practising before the actual event. Ideally, at the end of the course, students should be able to understand how to make a winning presentation in terms of planning, organising and delivery, while also being able to give a persuasive speech, since many of them reflect a combination of informative and persuasive purposes[4, p. 142].

The following considerations are based on a lecture (*Annex 1*, which contains the actual lecture plan, is included at the end of the paper) designed for first-year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration in Iași as part of their Business English course, and are set to give them a general idea of how to prepare and deliver an effective presentation in English, while also illustrating some key points that are specifically tailored to the business field.

Naturally, a lecture on presentations needs to be a good model to follow. As we know, the audience will likely lose interest after the first few minutes of the speech unless we make sure to attract and keep their attention focused. To achieve that, "as a speaker, you need to motivate your audience based on their level of need and then reward them"[4, p. 143]. In turn, motivating someone requires more having more information about them. Knowing your audience is, in fact, central to the whole process, because every aspect of your speech will ideally be tailored to whoever is in attendance. Hence, there is an entire section of the lecture dedicated to this, as illustrated further on.

To start the lecture, I typically either involve students in a brainstorming activity, so that they bring their own contribution to the topic of the lesson, or use a shock tactic to get their attention and eager to find out more. In the case of this particular meeting, the latter seemed the most effective, capitalising on the prevalence of public speaking anxiety among students and professionals alike. So, by announcing that they would have to deliver a presentation in one hour, I asked students to list the first things that come to mind, which might include the following questions:

- What is the topic?
- Who is my audience?
- How long will the presentation last?
- Do I need a PowerPoint® presentation?
- Do I have enough time to prepare?
- Do I have to present in English?

At this point, I let students know that they do not actually need to deliver a presentation right away, but *if* they had to, the following lecture would help them navigate the situation.

The good news about speaking in public is that the presenter is in control of what is being said and how it is done, but the bad news is that, as with everything in life, one cannot control everything. However, delivering presentations is not only an essential business skill, but also a life skill, in the sense that, in broad terms, each time we talk for more than a couple of minutes, we are essentially delivering a presentation, having the same general structure and making use of similar techniques as those involved in a public speech.

In order to further point out the importance of acquiring this skill with a view to accessing an employment opportunity in the business field, the teacher could also point out a few situations that might require students to deliver a presentation in English, with or without prior preparation: presenting one's contribution to a project during a business meeting, making a sales pitch, attending a conference or trade fair, highlighting one's previous work experience during a job interview, debriefing after a business trip, presenting the new business strategy to company employees etc. Unfortunately, even though companies rely a lot on their employees' presenting skills and the success of many business activities relies on effective and/or persuasive presentations, very few of them actually provide specialised training which seems counterproductive. And, although public speaking in general is more of a life skill, there are some specific elements that students need to be aware of when preparing for a formal, business presentation in a foreign language.

## 1. PREPARATION

There are essentially two major parts to a presentation: preparation and delivery. In terms of preparation, a presenter should start with the very general aspects like date and time, place and room set-up, length of the talk, equipment needed, deciding on the need for handouts and whether there will be questions during the presentation or at the end[5]. Most importantly, however, none of these considerations is relevant if the presenter does not have the audience in mind the whole time. In fact, as previously stated, the audience should dictate every aspect of the presentation as "part of our speaking proficiency depends on our ability to speak differentially, depending upon our audience and upon the way we absorb their reactions and respond to them"[6]. The number of people attending the presentation will certainly be a factor when considering the location, since everyone should be able to feel comfortable, but it may also affect the choice of date and time, since, ideally, the great majority of attendees needs to be available for the event. This, in turn, could determine the length of the talk. How much the audience knows about the topic and how well the presenter knows them will have to be carefully considered beforehand as well, since the content of the talk and the register (formal/informal) used will heavily rely on this information.

There are certain particularities which need to be discussed at this point, both from a business and a linguistic perspective. Firstly, register is something difficult for students to get right at times, especially when it comes to a foreign language, because distinguishing between linguistic nuances requires a certain proficiency level that might escape them. It is recommended, thus, to provide students with clear examples of formal versus informal language that is commonly used in presentations, so that they can choose accordingly. Ellis and Johnson identify three key features of communicating a message (orally or in writing): "(1) organising the message, (2) signalling intention, and (3) emphasizing important points"[7]. They involve both linguistic and non-linguistic skills, which should be exemplified by the teacher in correlation with register.

In terms of content, once the topic of the presentation is established, actual information gathering and structuring can begin. Depending on the length of the speech, it is recommended that a number of three[5] to maybe five main points are identified, as they will

be elaborated on throughout the presentation. According to Mable Chan, the structure of a presentation is very simple: the presenter should first tell the audience what they are going to say, present the information and then repeat what they have just said[4, p. 143].

Nevertheless, the purpose of the talk and its importance to the audience will in turn dictate the content. Many presentations are designed to inform, teach or persuade the audience, and this will also be reflected in the way they are delivered. In the case of business presentations, “an area which requires public speaking skills the most, [...] persuasion is essential”[8]. It can be achieved through linguistic, para-linguistic and extra-linguistic means, which emphasizes the idea that presentations should be seen as an ensemble of techniques designed with one purpose in mind: achieving the presenter’s purpose.

Visuals are also essential in conveying the message, as it is widely known that their impact significantly surpasses words alone. The quality, meaningfulness and number of visuals included in a presentation will determine its success in terms of message delivery and audience engagement. One of the most basic, but at the same time effective ways to include visuals in a presentation is by using PowerPoint™, but Canva™, Google Slides™ and Keynote™ are also popular options. Beyond eye-catching slide designs and transitions (which, if overused, can certainly have a negative impact on the presentation), a combination of key words, ideas, pictures, graphs and even short videos is oftentimes the best way to illustrate one’s point, no matter the topic. However, the number of elements to be included on a slide at one point in time needs to be limited. Whether the 5x5 or 6x6 rule (limiting the number of lines and words per line and/or elements on a slide to a maximum of 5 or 6) is observed, the main point is that slides should be visually easy to follow, since unexperienced presenters often forget that the audience is supposed to process both what they hear and what they see at the same time. The total number of slides could also pose a problem, and in a business context it is common for presenters to justify going overboard by emphasizing the importance of the topic or the need for including a lot of technical details or specific information. In reality, students need to realise that even the driest of topics can be presented in such a way that is clear, relatively easy to understand and even enjoyable, or at least not deemed a waste of time.

## **2. DELIVERY**

Delivering a presentation might be seen by many as the most difficult part of the process, as it is the one that is actually seen by others. For those who struggle with public speaking, doing so in a foreign language can be downright anxiety-inducing. Nevertheless, delivery is largely a reflection of the amount of planning which has taken place behind the scenes, so it is worth it to actually put in the time and effort beforehand, so that all that is left on the day is dealing with the potentially unexpected issues (some of which can also be planned for).

Going back to expressing oneself in English, I normally make the following recommendations to my undergraduate business students:

- Speak clearly
- Use simple grammar
- Use signposts
- Emphasize key points
- Check and practise pronunciation
- Learn topic-specific vocabulary

These tips reflect a number of common issues that they face, but they also contribute to the clarity of the delivered message, since successful presentations are often very well structured, with the focus being on the topic itself, instead of the complexity of the means used to transmit it. At this point, I typically provide students with a few practical examples of useful language in the form of matching or fill-in type exercises to cover specialised vocabulary on several business-related topics like finance, marketing, management etc., and also signposting.

Handling questions is another point of concern for presenters. Powell identifies four basic types of questions: good, difficult, unnecessary and irrelevant[9]. The speaker should have an answer for each type. In the first case, saying '*Thank you for your question!*' or '*That is a very good question. I'm glad you asked that!*' would be a good answer, while '*To be honest, I think this is off-topic.*' could work if the question asked is irrelevant and the presenter wants to move on.

I typically end my lecture on presentations with some general tips, which I discuss with my students in terms of importance and/or appropriateness for achieving our goal of preparing and delivering successful (business) presentations. Some of these are:

- Tell a joke at the beginning to relax the atmosphere
- Speak more slowly than you usually do
- Involve the audience
- Move around during the presentation
- Smile a lot
- Use gestures to emphasize key points
- Read out the presentation from a script
- Stand up when giving your presentation
- Always keep to your plan[10]
- Prepare for the unexpected
- Adapt to the cues from the audience
- End on a strong note

Chan believes that a good ending to a presentation can make up for a not-so-great beginning, so simply summarising the main points is not going to do much for the presenter. Assigning a task to the audience, however, is much more effective in challenging them and giving them something to consider at a later date[4, p. 150]. At this particular lecture, I left my students to ponder on this quote by Dale Carnegie: "There are always three speeches, for every one you actually gave. The one you practiced, the one you gave, and the one you wish you gave"[11]. Therefore, I urge them to try and give a speech that is as close as possible to the one they wish they gave.

## CONCLUSIONS

The topic of presentations is an ample one, and depending on the desired level of proficiency and/or specific requirements, it could span an entire semester. What I have found to be the most effective, whether the topic is covered during one lecture or an entire course, is providing students with a clear structure on which they can build upon depending on the situation and also spending time on emphasising those elements that distinguish delivering a presentation in a business context (namely level of formality, specialised vocabulary, foreign

language grammar and vocabulary issues, cultural differences) from one that is more informal and performed in their first language. Moreover, as mentioned before, it is essential that they are each given the opportunity to practise delivering a short ten-minute speech. This takes place later on in the semester (during one of their seminars) and is part of the Business English course requirements, so it does keep them motivated.

This lecture can definitely be expanded to a two-hour one or cover several meetings, with more practical exercises to be included if necessary, depending on the students' level of English and needs. They can also practise giving short speeches on a given topic (prepared in advance or on the spot) or take a sample presentation (video) and break it down in terms of content, delivery, impact etc. The main takeaway is that a lecture on business presentations needs to be as general or as specific as the audience requires. In the case of undergraduate learners, who are mostly pre-experienced, an overview of the topic is advised, with emphasis on the key points that are essential for successful business communication.

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Annex 1

**LECTURE PLAN**

UNIVERSITY: Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania

FACULTY: Faculty of Economics and Business Administration

COURSE NAME: Business English 2

LEVEL: First-year undergraduate

SEMESTER OF STUDY: 2

LEVEL OF ENGLISH: Intermediate

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 100

LECTURE TOPIC: **Preparing and Delivering Business Presentations in English**

LECTURE DURATION: 50 minutes

APPROACH: Communicative

**OBJECTIVES:**

By the end of the lecture, the students will be able to:

- understand the specificity of business presentations in English
- plan a presentation following the basic structure
- use appropriate language, vocabulary and register
- deliver a short presentation on a business-related topic

TEACHING AIDS: video projector, laptop, Power Point™ presentation

**PROCEDURE:**

Stage	Teacher's activities and language	Students' activities and language	Time	Skills
Warm-up	-The teacher (T.) announces that students (Ss.) will be expected to deliver a presentation in one hour. -T. elicits the first questions that come to Ss.' minds when presented with this challenge. -T. lists examples of common questions and informs Ss. that they will not in fact have to complete that task, mentioning however that if they had to, the following lecture would help them navigate the situation. -T. points out that public speaking in general and delivering presentations in particular are not only work skills but also life skills and provides examples of various situations that might require Ss. to put this into practice, such as: presenting one's contribution to a project during a business meeting, making a sales pitch, attending a	-Ss. state the questions they have about delivering a presentation, prompted by the T.'s announcement.	5'	Listening Speaking
		-Ss. mention any other concerns they may have on the topic.	2'	Speaking
		-Ss. take note of the possible scenarios which would require	3'	Listening

<b>Main Part</b>	conference or a trade fair etc.	them to deliver a presentation and add more examples to the list.		Speaking
	-T. proceeds to present the two main parts to a presentation: preparation and delivery.			
	-Starting with preparation, T. lists the key points to be considered when planning for a business presentation. These encompass the basics such as date, time and venue but also specifics like the how audience and their cultural background impact the selection of content, language and register to be used.	-Ss. discuss what each element mentioned by the teacher entails in terms of preparing for a presentation and provide practical examples where possible.	5'	Listening Speaking
	-T. introduces a short matching exercise to illustrate the distinction between formal and informal language in English.			
	-T. moves on to talk about the content of a presentation, listing some key points to be considered, such as: topic, purpose of the talk, identifying three main points, the topic's importance to the audience, structure, visuals.	-Ss. complete the matching exercise and share the answers with the class.	3'	Reading Writing Speaking
	-T. mentions that designing the slides for a PowerPoint™ presentation is as important as the content itself.	-Ss. take notes, ask and answer questions based on the T.'s input.	5'	Listening Speaking
-T. illustrates how the <i>Rule of Six</i> (or five, according to other sources) applies to a well-designed slide.				
-T. asks Ss. to count the objects on a slide (which contains 10 ducks) as quickly as possible and raise their hands as soon as they have. Then, on the next slide, there are 6 ducks, and Ss. will have to count them again, this time noticing that it takes less time. T. explains that the human brain is capable to process information quicker if there are fewer elements to look at, which illustrates the importance of the <i>Rule of six</i> .	-Ss. count the elements on the slide and raise their hands as soon as they are done. They do the same thing for the second slide.	2'	Speaking	
-T. also provides practical examples of a good slide (which observes the rule) and a poorly designed one to further prove their point.				
-T. moves on to the second main				

<b>Closing remarks</b>	<p>part of a presentation, namely delivery. As this is a language course, the T. focusses on expressing oneself in English and discusses some tips such as: speaking clearly, using simple grammar, checking and practising pronunciation, learning topic-specific vocabulary, emphasizing key points and using signposts.</p> <p>-T. invites Ss. to add anything they think is important to the list.</p>	<p>-Ss. comment on the two examples of good/bad slides.</p>	5'	Reading Speaking
	<p>-T. moves on to the last point concerning delivery, which is answering questions. T. lists different types of questions and invites Ss. to suggest possible ways to answer them.</p>	<p>-Ss. take notes and ask for clarification if necessary.</p>	2'	Listening Speaking Writing
	<p>-T. ends the lecture by listing some final tips on presentations. T. asks Ss. to express their opinion on the importance of each tip.</p>	<p>-Ss. discuss the T.'s recommendations and suggest other points to be added to the list.</p>	3'	Speaking
	<p>-T. leaves Ss. with a final quote about public speaking.</p>	<p>-Ss. discuss together with the teacher what the best ways are to give answers to various types of questions.</p>	5'	Reading Speaking
		<p>-Ss. go through the final list of tips together with the T. and say whether they think they are essential, somewhat important or best avoided.</p> <p>-Ss. comment on the quote, stating what it means to them.</p>	10'	Listening Reading Speaking

Source: Author's own lecture plan