Speaking Essays: An Idea to Help L2 Academic Writers
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Academic writing is difficult in your first language. It is even more demanding in a second language. Many of the difficulties experienced by L2 writers stem from having to convert abstract ideas and difficult content into linear, logically connected prose. This is particularly challenging for the learner as it can be extremely difficult to solve local vocabulary and grammar issues while maintaining a secure sense of the text as a whole.

Because of this it is useful to regard the pre-writing, or planning stages as preparation for discourse and to include either un-assessed free writing or other discourse based exercises. The exercise below is based on producing language at whole text level and can be used at various stages of the pre-writing process depending on the language proficiency and academic experience of your learners.

The idea of this exercise, which is an adaptation of Paul Nation's 4-3-2 spoken fluency exercise, is to give your learners the opportunity to speak their essay before they write it. This should help your learners to formulate the words and grammar needed to transform their ideas and content into connected language. It is a transitional practice exercise so perfection is not required at this point – indeed you should expect and allow your learners to produce some faulty language.

Learners may experience issues with cohesion and even coherence but it is important that you allow them to test hypotheses and to experiment with ways of expressing their ideas and content. Do not be tempted to step in and spot-correct as this would defeat the purpose of the exercise, which is to provide un-assessed practice and to give learners the opportunity to learn from output. Remember that learners do not only learn to speak, they speak to learn. Your learners will notice any deficits or lacks in their output and so will become more aware of areas that need attention and improvement.

So, it is a good idea to regard this exercise as one in which your learners produce spoken drafts of their essays and to regard it as part of the iterative process of written production. Naturally, this exercise is part of a process which will develop into producing written drafts for self- and peer-review.

Stage One:

- Organise your class into pairs, preferably with the whole class sitting in a circle or horseshoe.
- Designate a speaker and a listener in each pair.
• The listener must be an active listener and should give lots of encouraging non-verbal signals to the speaker, but cannot ask questions or engage in conversation at this stage.

• The speaker must try to speak their essay using, as far as possible, language they might possibly use in the final written version.

• Give your listener 4 minutes to speak their essay.

• At the end of the time – ask the listener to give some brief positive feedback to the speaker.

Stage Two:

• Ask all of the speakers to stand up and move clockwise to the next listener.

• Repeat stage one but only allow 3 minutes for the speaker to deliver the same content as in stage one.

Stage Three:

• Ask all of the speakers to stand up and to move round to the next listener.

• Repeat stage two but only allow 2 minutes for the speaker to deliver the same content as in stage two.

Stages Four to Six:

• Repeat the process but change learner roles so speakers become listeners and listeners become speakers.

Variations

• You can do this exercise with or without essay plans depending on the experience and proficiency of your learners.

• You can condition this exercise differently according to the written output you wish to prepare for. You could, for example, work with just an introductory paragraph and reduce the time to 60 seconds- 45 seconds- 30 seconds. This could then work as a warm up to a class.

• To help your speakers monitor the time you can use an online stopwatch and display it with a digital projector.

• With more experienced learners you can condition the listener feedback to a condensed form of peer review. You may wish to restrict listener feedback to specific aspects of the speaker’s output such as vocabulary or linking words.

• Error correction and mistake management exercises should be delayed so as not to inhibit the spoken output. It is perhaps best to note any significant problems and design remedial work into your future teaching programme.
Mark Searle is a lecturer, teacher trainer and course designer working in EMI and EAP contexts. Mark has taught on the ELT component of the MSc ALSLA and designs and delivers EMI teacher training courses at the University of Oxford Department of Education. He also works for the British Council as a teacher trainer on the Academic Teaching Excellence initiative training NNS academics to teach in L2 English. Mark has also designed and delivered EAP programmes in pre-sessional and in-course contexts both in the UK and abroad. In addition to this Mark has worked as a course director, examiner (ARELS/OUDLE), academic consultant and teacher.

References: