

# COLLABORATIVE ORAL PRESENTATIONS AS A REAL LIFE CHALLENGE. THE STORY OF THREE CRITICAL INCIDENTS

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## **Abstract**

*Teaching conclusions are drawn on the basis of teacher –student participation in the finals of the JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT ROMANIA PROGRAMME. The event tapped at a variety of life skills involving such interpersonal verbal communication skills as oral presentations. Using the frame of critical experiential teacher learning, the paper overviews the collaborative logistics used in the preparation stage of a skit as well as two instances of actual student performance. The three critical incidents identified are further analysed for their pedagogical implications.*

**Key words:** simulations, oral presentations, experiential learning, life skills, critical incidents.

Motto *Research does not mean a hard chase after novelty...Research means mobility.*  
(Sabina Ispas, VOX NEWS TV, *Intalniri*, Lumea Academica – anii 60, July 31, 2010)

## **Life skills in the language classroom**

Life skills have been defined as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (5). In order to cater for this need, language classroom practice has resorted to simulations as a teaching aid closest to real life tasks. The simulation paradigm features such aspects as: small group work, individual / group goals, performance in a (sometimes) competitive environment, combination of skills (commonly writing and speaking), opportunity for curriculum integration and meaningful assessment.

As far as real life tasks are concerned, personal experience has shown that although they feature most of the above simulation based caveats, they differ mostly through higher learning impact and finer tuning of theory to practice for both teacher and student.

The present paper documents this statement by providing an experiential account of three critical instances involving student preparation for and delivery of oral presentations. However, the research focus is not on student assessment but rather on how the critical incidents could prioritize teaching practice.

### **The critical incident as theoretical framework**

Research of critical moments underpinning professional development has focused on time spans of varying lengths i.e. extensive (*educational biographies*), average (*study of events*) or limited (*incidents*) (2). Unlike events, incidents are considered to be unplanned, unanticipated, uncontrolled while containing both the problem as well as the solution in a flash of a second (4). The critical incident has been used in history related literature with the meaning of tipping point and this meaning has been taken over by recent educational literature (4). The present paper illustrates three such instances.

### **Background and rationale**

Oral presentations have been used in the home teaching situation (HTS) with first and second year engineering students at the Bucharest Poly in mixed ability classes ranking at A2 – C1 levels. It is worth mentioning that these simulations have been integrated in the assessment process. Traditional HTS simulation tasks have been limited mostly to

- i. oral presentations of student developed companies, engineering related or free topics
- ii. writing a promo for a local pub based on actual pub interviewing (authored by Ms. Elena SAVU).

In the out of class academic environment, students were able to really transfer or implement their oral presentation skills

- i. by presenting genuine research work - in Romanian
- ii. in a contest of oral presentations – in a foreign language (English included).

Both situations were offered by the yearly organization of the Bucharest Poly Days.

How well these ventures might stand the test of reality beyond the academic circles has not yet been documented or researched at least at HTS level.

The present paper is a report of one such rare occasion. It was provided by the participation of 2 groups of engineering students from the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Mechatronics (FIMM, UPB) in the finals of the JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT ROMANIA (JAR) PROGRAMME.

The programme is devoted to disseminating business entrepreneurship skills worldwide and finalists were required to deliver a live presentation of their specific project. Teachers had dissemination, support and monitoring responsibilities while acting as an interface between the JAR staff and banking consultants. To enhance the free exploratory spirit of the programme, teacher- student meetings also took place in informal settings (cafeterias, student pubs).

### **Participants and task**

Although the name of the teams and participants are of public record, the references made in the present paper are going to be codified for confidentiality reasons. Team 1 (students A, B, C, D, student D being inactive at presentation stage) developed a project for the service industry while Team 2 (students E and F) developed a prototype. Both oral presentations were made in Romanian. However, with one exception (A, a student of French), all students had had or were in the process of getting oral presentation training in the English seminar conducted by the paper author. Consequently, some degree of transferability from English into Romanian has been assumed at least at the competence level. Exposure to oral presentation structure and rhetorical devices was of recent induction with Team 1 and long standing with Team 2. Furthermore, the Team 2 speaker had already had a series of successes in the afore mentioned academic contests.

### **Descriptive data (1) - The collaborative paradigm**

The collaborative paradigm actually spawned the critical incidents in both teams in a variety of ways. Differences in the weight of collaboration between the two teams refer to both degree of teacher control and the point in time they led to the occurrence of the critical incidents:

- i. currently monitored by the teacher with Team 1 and mostly control-free with Team 2.
- ii. the critical incidents arose in the preparation (see Descriptive data 2) and delivery stages with Team 1 and in the delivery stage with Team 2.

Further details on collaboration issues have been included in the following sub-chapters.

## **Descriptive data (2) – Skit development stages**

Here is a description of the steps underpinning the preparation of an oral presentation skit by Team 1. The skit development session took place in the presence of the banking consultant as an observer. The presentation of these steps provides the background to the first critical incident.

- i. **Individual skits.** Each of the three Team 1 students present was requested to write down his version of a 4 minute (contest requirement) speech (skit) in case he was the one chosen to defend the project. The teacher also submitted a version.
- ii. **Skits anonymity.** All four skits were computer processed and assigned random names (the elephant, hippo, rhinoceros, mouse, etc.) by the teacher.
- iii. **Plenary analysis.** Each skit was read and discussed in plenary (in the partial absence of one of the participants who had to leave earlier).
- iv. **Relevant ideas.** A list of relevant ideas from each skit was drawn up.  
This was the end of the teacher managed development session. Work continued further under the tutorship of the banking consultant.
- v. **Core material.** The banking consultant received a mail copy of all original contributions and list of ideas.
- vi. **Proposal 1.** The banking consultant took over the responsibility of working out a first draft (Proposal 1) based on the above materials and discussed it with the whole team in the (voluntary) absence of the co-coordinating teacher.
- vii. **Oral presentation techniques.** At school, the teacher introduced students to key concepts regarding the presentation of the main body of an oral presentation, i.e. *listing, linking, sequencing*.
- viii. **Tipping point.** Students expressed some worries with respect to their ability to act out Proposal 1 version. One student in particular requested that the whole proposal should be re-drafted and mapped onto the key communication concepts and devices recently studied in the classroom.
- ix. **Proposals 2.** The teacher revised proposal 1 and offered more versions, inviting students to choose.
- x. **The presentation team.** Two students volunteered to provide a joint presentation. Instructions for cooperation and rehearsal were e-mailed by the teacher.
- xi. **Moot point.** Choice of final version became a moot point. One student favoured Proposal 1, another one favoured Proposal 2.

xii. **Result.** The two students were unable to agree on their own over final version. Consequently, a decision was made under teacher and events pressure and rehearsal of final version took place on the very day of contest opening.

### **Descriptive data (3) - The critical incidents**

Here is a description of the three critical events including the one triggered by the skit development stage presented above.

#### **Critical Incident 1 – Say it isn’t so, Teacher!**

The first critical incident concerned the teacher’s skit and it occurred during the plenary assessment of individual skits. This skit complied with all the structuring and rhetorical devices recommended in the academic course bibliography (3), i.e. greeting, self presentation, introducing structure, starting the main body, using audience maintaining devices via listing, sequencing, linking, ending, AV) introducing However, the group opinion rejected all the parts that actually implemented theoretical guidelines. Before entering specifics, it should be reminded that

- all skits were anonymous
- the group however attempted to guess the name of the author

These two specific circumstances resulted in erroneous authorship attribution: the tightly controlled flow of ideas in the teacher’s skit made the group assign it to the authorship of a critical team participant who was (undeservedly) considered fairly self-controlled, uncooperative and standoffish. On the other hand, the most applauded skit was actually the skit of the “critical student” (who had left - for acceptable reasons - after submitting his work) and erroneously attributed to the teacher. The result was that while key theory grounded teacher suggestions were dismissed as inappropriate, the critical student’s skit was eventually retained as a good piece of written discourse to be later included among the project portfolio documents. When authorships were disclosed, the group were genuinely baffled.

#### **Critical incident 2 - The importance of *Sitz Fleish***

Step xii (above) was a clear harbinger of faulty performance when critical incident 2 occurred. As expected, lack of practice, collaboration, rehearsal and AV handling skills did not pay off. The two speakers’ contributions featured the following strategies.

Speaker 1 – opened the proceedings by resorting to a mixture of memorization and extemporaneous output which posed some problems of comprehensibility to the audience.

Speaker 2 – carried the brunt of the task by resorting to the structured AV based presentation technique formally taught in the latest English Language seminars. Needless to say that the second strategy worked and partly saved the group the day. This accounts for the title of this subchapter which points to the impact of formal study skills.

### **Critical Incident 3 - The long way to knowledge management**

The third incident concerns the collaboration pattern between student - teacher – banking consultants in Team 2. Despite a two year long history of joint work on oral presentation projects - with certificated successes - involving the author of the present paper, Speaker E (Team 2) had a rough time in adapting to a non- academic audience and a highly competitive environment. The actual preparation stage had totally been in the hands of the banking consultants (former JAR finalists) who strongly recommended a narrative rather than a technical approach based on spatial facts and figures.

Consequently, Speaker E paid particular attention to specific communicative devices such as exordium and transitions but missed important propositional items. Nevertheless, the project substance eventually won their authors an important prize.

### **Pedagogical implications**

Why was the teacher’s version voted out? Why was a born communicator outplayed by a formally trained mind? Why did an experienced speaker find himself at such a loss when performing a real life task? And eventually, what can a teacher learn from these seemingly minor incidents? These are the questions that practice has brought up for theoretical consideration. There are obviously many answers and some are self-evident, i.e. incomplete teacher-student interaction through lack of support, monitoring or feedback being one of them.

Nevertheless, an analysis of each critical incident can refer the practitioner to some key theoretical consideration that happened to be overlooked, to some “yield” point that could have been foreseen if the theoretical background had been properly considered in the first place and this may have implications for future pedagogical decisions. Here is a list of the main findings in an order of increasing importance for fine tuning classroom practice.

#### Critical incident 3 - the structuring criteria.

The underperformance of a gifted and experienced speaker may be basically traced to downplaying a key issue in oral presentations i.e. *the suitable structuring criterion for organizing content*. As the speaker had to present a prototype it was clear that the focus

should have been spatial rather than the narrative chronology of prototype heuristics. As pedagogical remedial action, future classroom practice should integrate more specific activities of matching topics to appropriate structuring criterion.

#### Critical incident 2 - the CEFR breakdown of skills

Speaker A (Team 1) is a really outstanding communicator who has recently got spectacular results as a sales agent with a range of companies. As a witness to an instance of this speaker's live telephone salesmanship I could report perfect mastery of a range of interactive functions from propositional to smooth turn taking, initiation, termination, engagement, framing through contextualization cues, affective or relational functions in addition to born qualities of expression and fluency (in Romanian). These were the skills that qualified him for the job of opening the JAR project presentation session in the first place. In the changed environment of spoken production however, expression and fluency performance were not enough to save poor propositional performance. His failure to perform in the said circumstances just highlighted the divide between the requirements of *spoken interaction* and *spoken production*. The more acceptable performance of Speaker B was accounted for by his recent initiation in latter. This may be taken as a piece of warning for teachers to not generalize one kind of skill to another. Hence, the need of devising targeted exercises for training students in this respect.

#### Critical incident 1 – the humanity of formality/

We have included in Annex 1 the specific areas voted out from the teacher's skit (the mouse). The incident was not followed up by any kind of discussion or formal interview. That is the reason why we can only provide a series of assumptions regarding the negative feedback provided by the 3 group participants to the teacher's skit.

- i. Personal retaliation – The group discussion took place in an atmosphere of concerted criticism as the group attempted to uncover the hidden voice of the assumed (absent) writer and match it against what they considered reprehensible behavioural features. That is the reason why every word was suspected of hiding a value that was alien to the group values. For example, the reference to the *position* held in the team by the speaker was taken as a sign of “arrogance”.
- ii. Audience cultural background – The only person present who was actually getting an induction course into oral presentation techniques had some serious literacy problems both in Romanian and English. The other two evaluators (the banking consultant and the student of French) had not received formal training in oral presentation

techniques. Consequently, they were not aware of the TTT\* rule recommended to Anglo-Saxon speakers or most importantly the need for structuring. (It is worth mentioning that considering the time constraints, the TTT rule obviously needed adaptation). So the group criticism could also have been motivated by pragmatic commonsensical reasons.

- iii. Deep vs. surface structure. NLP theory sees language as the surface structure while our thoughts represent the deep structure nourishing it. That is why, one might assume that the difference in thinking patterns might have accounted for the rejection of the “mouse” skit. The limited space of this article does not allow inclusion of all the skits submitted by the other three participants. However, all of them featured the same lack of reference to metacognitive gains which were however present in the teacher s version (references to learning).

The list of possible explanations to this particular critical incident is still open and more targeted experiments should be devised to clarify some of the issues it has raised. Nevertheless, from a pedagogical point of view, the incident should sensitise teaching practice to the power of human classroom relations, student educational background and development of thinking patterns. In conclusion, training students for real life oral presentations shall direct personal remedial teaching in the direction of curriculum design, (organizing information, incident 3), material development (spoken interaction vs. production incident 2) and most of all more learner centrednes (incident 1).

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\* Tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you have told them.



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*Annex 1*

*D. soricel (the mouse  
- scraps from original teacher's version -*

Original skit	Language Skills	Group evaluation
Aici sunt prezent în calitate de inițiator/manager de proiect/ <u>membri al echipei MF Pay</u> . ( <i>I am here in my capacity as initiator/project manager/member of MF Pay team</i> )	Self -introduction - reference to self, company, responsibility etc.	Group accepted only underlined phrase considering the other two options as a sign of ".arrogance".
Colegii mei nu sunt toți pe scenă dar am căzut cu toți de acord că această prezentare trebuie să se refere la <u>două</u> aspecte ale experienței JAR : <b>PROPUNEREA DE PROIECT</b> dar și <b>ECHIPA</b> . ( <i>My other colleagues are not not on stage but we all agreed to include two issues in our presentation of the JAR experience. THE TEAM AND THE PROJECT</i> )	Introducing structure (see underlined)	Group considered circumstances made goal or structure presentation redundant: it was clear what they were there for. The whole fragment was voted out.
Noi toți credem că am învățat din amândouă câte ceva despre drumul de la o idee la business. ( <i>We all believe we have learnt from both something about the road from an idea to business</i> )	Topic sentence opening main body of presentation	Group considered the idea insignificant. Whole fragment voted out.
Sa va dam 2 exemple de povesti: una rea si una buna ( <i>Let me tell you two stories: an unhappy one and a happy one</i> )	Maintaining interest via concrete examples	Group dismissed it as counterproductive.