



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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BRINGING ESOL WORDS TO LIFE WITH DRAMATIC PRESENTATIONS

Classes in public speaking and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), developed at Monroe Community College, work together to sharpen students' communication skills in both writing and speaking. Students in the public speaking class deliver storytelling speeches based on essays written by students in the ESOL class.

After a speech instructor used a magazine of articles and essays by ESOL students as a resource for her class to practice storytelling techniques, she met with the ESOL professor who publishes the essays magazine every semester. They decided to take the effort a step further. The ESOL instructor selects the best essays from her current students who are preparing for English composition and gives them to her speech colleague, who distributes them among her public speaking students who will perform before a joint class session.

Not all of the selected essays are chosen for performance. ESOL students earn a grade on their essays independent of the joint exercise and are not graded on whether their essays are selected. The speech students receive a participation grade for the project, ample feedback from evaluations, and a short discussion after the performances.

The exercise takes place toward the end of the semester when students are most comfortable with their classmates and have had a chance to hone their writing and speaking skills. About three weeks before the presentations, speech students form teams of two or three. Each team selects an essay and analyzes how best to present it as a team. Because many of the essays tell a story that includes more than one voice, the team identifies the role that each team member will play, as well as individuals who will present different narrative parts of the essay. In some cases, these become dramatic performances. Students practice as a team on their own and during class a few times before both classes come together for the presentations. The exercise, a communication-intensive way to merge disciplines, reinforces

skills for students in both public speaking and ESOL. The speech students learn:

- Team-building—Students prepare presentations in teams, developing their analytical and decision-making skills. The teams learn how to organize the presentations based on students' interests and speaking strengths. In the end, this team effort also strengthens camaraderie between and among the students.
- Writing and editing—Students rework the sentence structure of the essays into the structure of spoken word, while retaining the author's unique voice and the integrity of the written work, learning the difference in creating for the spoken and written word.
- Public speaking—Students deal with the anxiety that comes with performing before an audience of unfamiliar faces and the authors of their words. Because they know the authors will be in the room, speech students want this presentation to be their best; thus, they learn the value of preparation and practice. They want to get every aspect of public speaking "right"—pronunciation (especially since the authors are not primarily English-speaking), volume, pace, and body language. Furthermore, they realize how important an introduction can be because they want to be sure and give credit to the authors of their words.

ESOL students learn:

- Communication skills building—Though they are not writing their essays for presentation as speeches, the experience helps students who are learning English to improve and gain confidence in their writing. The changes made by the speech students, though minor, further reinforce the use of standard English grammar and syntax.
- Exposure to new forms of communication—Listening to presentations gives ESOL students valuable exposure to public speaking, a form of communication they might not have encountered in English.
- Validation—The author is recognized before each presentation. The attention makes some students



uncomfortable or nervous, but soon they are awed by the experience of hearing their words spoken by native English speakers and by the positive reaction of their classmates during and after the presentations. One student seemed embarrassed when his name was announced before his essay was presented. But after the speech, as other students told him how good it was, he began to sit taller in his seat.

After the speeches are given, students are encouraged to comment. After some initial hesitation, they begin to relax and open up. Pride is evident on the faces of both authors and presenters. One ESOL student said that listening to a native English speaker deliver her essay was another opportunity to learn English.

"Even though we have a different accent and problem with accent, it is really good for us to have experience with speaking," she said. "In America, everybody has a different accent. I'm never sure who speaks OK. When I heard the students speak, I knew they had really good pronunciation."

Essays chosen for presentation expose the speech students to non-native American experiences. Essay titles have included: "Arriving in America," "How Soccer Earned Me an Education," "Waiting for a Long Time" (leaving Korea to join her husband in U.S.), "It's Never Too Late to Learn" (to ride a bicycle), "My Life as a Pirate" (wearing a corrective eye patch), and "He is a Thief!" (about luggage stolen on arrival to the U.S.).

One of the speech students, who teamed with a partner to perform an essay about a woman who observes a little girl playing on a beach, said, "When you portrayed it the way they were feeling it when they wrote it, they were nodding and smiling, as if to say, 'That's good, that's good. I'm glad you got it the way I meant it.'" The student and his partner alternated in reading sections of the essay, choreographing the ending so that they said the last line together: "I wanted her to keep dreaming."

Throughout the semester, discussions about cultural diversity are woven into the curriculum in the public speaking class to prepare students for the experience. Once they receive the essays, students are asked to study the content closely before adapting it for the spoken word. Sometimes the topics require an in-depth understanding of the writer's culture for speakers to convey the writer's intent successfully.

A benefit for all students is becoming acquainted with people whose paths they might not normally cross, a plus in the come-and-go world of a community college.

An essential goal of this exercise is for students to appreciate the value of collaboration across writing and

speech communication disciplines. During the comment period, ESOL students often say, "I didn't think my essay was so good until I saw them present it." Speech students typically reply, "Well, I couldn't have done it if you didn't write it."

Ilene Benz, *Instructor, Communication*
Suzanne El Rayess, *Associate Professor, ESOL and Foreign Languages*

For further information, contact the authors at Monroe Community College, 1000 E. Henrietta Road, Rochester, NY 14623-5780. e-mail: ibenz@monroecc.edu, or selrayess@monroecc.edu