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Collaborative Action Research – A Tool to Enrich Presentation Skills of the Professional Students

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Abstract

The ability to present one's own thoughts to the other is one of the keys to success in this age of communication. With the advent of globalization, the present era has got an unprecedented significance for presentation skills. Professional students are required to communicate clearly and confidently to succeed in their academic and professional careers. Most of the professional students are struggling to communicate as they feel less confident to voice their views in any public speaking activities like addressing people, participating in debates, group discussions and interviews. It is because there is a lacuna between the academic curricula and industry requirements.

The present paper aspires to exude confidence levels and to develop presentation skills employing tailor made activities. It aims at exploring some of the common problems

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students have during their presentations and intends to suggest solutions and improve their presentation skills.

Introduction

In this age of 'ICE' (i.e. Information, Communication and Entertainment), industry expects students to possess good command over communication skills. The corporate world looks up their professionals as global citizens to reach out their clients across the world through effective communication. Communication not only builds long lasting relationships but also contributes enormously to the growth of individuals and organizations they work with. Hence, the ability to present one's own thoughts to others is the need of the hour. There are variety forms of presentations; seminars, workshops, symposia, students presentations, industry conferences, team and department presentations and so on (Rizvi, 2005). It is now widely accepted that this is one of the main means of communicating information in a personal (face-to-face) and rapid way (Bathia, 1993; Goodale, 1998; Swales, 1990). But there is a lacuna between the requirements of the corporate world and the abilities of the professional students.

Most of the professional students are not able to communicate effectively. Although many of them score well on paper become unemployable due to their inability to present their thoughts. For instance, their confidence levels go down during public speaking activities besides they are unable to open up and converse with others in English for varied purposes. When communicating with faculty, they feel nervous. They become speechless in HR interviews and consequently these problems, ultimately, lead to their letdown.

The present paper is drafted to attain the following objectives through few practical activities.

Objectives of the Paper

1. To encourage students for presentations through trial and error method.

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2. To focus on the problems that students encounter during their presentations.
3. To employ appropriate activities to hone presentation skills.
4. To suggest appropriate ways and means to improve.
5. To evaluate their performance after suggesting suitable tips.
6. To summarize with the scope for further improvement.

To attain the above stated objectives, the following methodology is adopted.

Methodology

Collaborative action research and trial and error method are employed as methodology to identify the problems and to suggest suitable remedies.

Collaborative Action Research (CAR)

Action research is the name given to an increasingly popular movement in educational research. It is a form of self-reflective enquiry which is being used in educational institutions' curriculum development and professional development of teachers. Action Research is a form of research where teachers play a pivotal role of researchers besides being teachers in their classrooms. It promotes teachers to be constant and meticulous observers of their own classes. As a part of this research, they collaborate, study, examine and explore their own classrooms with an objective of finding out the problems and solutions pertaining to the teaching and learning process (McNiff, Jean 1998).

The idea of presenting this paper has emerged out of personal observations made by the researchers (faculty). Then the members of faculty decided to collaborate and employ action research to find out appropriate solutions to the existing problems. It is a small scale and context specific research study conducted in English language lab sessions. The subjects of the research are I year students and the research process, data collection and analysis was continued for 2 – 3 weeks. Research tools such as oral responses and informal interactions of students were used to gather the data.

Trial and Error Method

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Trail and Error method, as referred in an online source (www.thefreedictionary.com), is a method of discovery for solving problems. This method is based on practical experiments and experience rather than that of theory one learns. The objective of this method is to reach apt solution or satisfactory result.

Introduction of Topic – Presentation Skills

Many professional students find it difficult to open up themselves during presentation sessions. Then, the members of faculty determined to find out some of the common problems that hamper their speaking skills during presentations. Initially, students were not ready to share their problems. To start with, a piece of information on the need for effective presentations for the professional development and utility in their career was discussed. Then, encouragement was given to students who are sociable, active and ready to make presentations so as to motivate the introvert students to present.

As a part of trial and error method, the students are allowed to make their presentations on self-introductions without any instructions. The purpose of this method is to test their existing knowledge on various aspects of ‘self-introductions’ and to identify the problems they encounter in their presentations.

About five active students have come forward and presented. Then, the members of the faculty have intervened with feedback and some inputs. The faculty has identified and reflected on the problems of the students.

The following is the sketch of problems observed by faculty:

Problems

- Lack of awareness about basics of presentation skills both verbal and non-verbal
- Stage etiquette
- Unaware of various aspects of self-introduction i.e. strengths, weaknesses, attitude, etc.
- Language problems such as grammar, vocabulary, and others.

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- Low confidence levels and irrational fear

In addition to the above, they have problems with question and answers strategies while eliciting and responding.

During an informal conversation, students have expressed the following problems:

- Fear of
 - vernacular medium
 - committing mistakes
 - demand for perfection
 - forming a low opinion among peer group, and
- Lack of practice and exposure to such activities

Keeping in view of the problems faced by the students, the members of the faculty have discussed these problems collaboratively in the Department. After few thought provoking discussions, it was decided to intervene with a remedial activity and appropriate suggestions to overcome the said problems. As a part of this, a tailor made activity was adopted from a book named ‘Communicational Skills for Technical Students’ (Farhathulla, 2002). The selected activity (Know Thyself) introduces various aspects of self-introductions and reinforces students’ knowledge to present dynamically and hassle-free. The following is the brief description of the hand-out.

Brief Description of the Hand-out (Appendix-1)

The activity is titled ‘Know Thyself’. A Famous Greek philosopher Socrates said ‘Know thyself’ as knowing oneself is very important. It implies that everyone should know his or her strengths and weaknesses. Only then they will be able to identify what they are good at and the areas where improvements are needed. Activities of such kind always promote self analysis on the part of individuals. Self-analysis gives all that required to face the battle of life with confidence and courage.

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As a matter of fact, students in general know very little about themselves. They get struck the moment they are asked to speak a few minutes about themselves. They do not understand where to begin, what to elaborate, highlight, proceed and end. This is a very pathetic situation.

Hence, the purpose of this hand out is to provide hands-on information about self introduction. The activity ‘know thyself’ demands specific answers to the contents like character, personality, attitudes, abilities, strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes. These contents require some thought process on the part of the students. It encourages them to think, write and present. As a follow up activity, rest of the students will react to their views either by defending them or opposing them. The interaction will thus lead to an open discussion.

In addition to this hand-out, the members of faculty have also provided required guidelines to make effective presentations. Some of them are as follows:

Guidelines by Faculty

1. Wear appropriate attire based on the situation, audience, and stage
2. Accept the invitation to make a presentation on the dais
3. Walk confidently on to the dais
4. Move to the podium with out hesitation
5. Take initiation, instead of pointing/ looking at others to start
6. Improve language proficiency through listening and speaking.
7. The modalities of presentations such as preparing and rehearsing and so on.

Students have felt encouraged and strengthened after required inputs of faculty besides ‘know-thyself’ activity given to them. They opined that tips given by faculty are a great source of support as they helped them to overcome fear and shyness. Moreover, the activity provides scope for additional information to speak effectively.

After the guidelines and interaction by Faculty, students are found to be pro-active and enthusiastic to participate and present. The presentations of the students were continued enthusiastically thereon.

Reflection on the Presentations Followed

The following reflections have been made by the faculty after listening to students improvised presentations:

- Students have come forward to participate and present
- They are confident to share with peer group and faculty
- They gradually picked up the behavioural traits to present from the stage
- Activity has given a chance to explore and reflect more about ones own individual personality traits.
- Their language is improved to some extent in terms of grammar and vocabulary
- Inhibited students have shown study improvement in their participation and presentation as they have gathered information on par with active students
- Majority of the students have expressed a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment since the activity and guidelines given them joyful learning
- Students have also expressed that activities of such kind should be continued since they shun their inhibitions and arouse enthusiasm for language learning

Conclusion

This paper has begun with one of the most common problems of professional students i.e., various inhibitions to participate and present. Members of faculty have employed trial and error method and collaborative action research to explore the problems and to suggest guidelines to overcome various inhibitions. To begin with, innate problems of the students were explored and then remedial measures in the form of appropriate tips and a tailor made activity given to students. This combination proves to be encouraging and yield out fruitful results.

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Appendix-1

(Adopted from Communication Skills for Technical Students, T.M. Farhathulla, 2002)

‘Know thyself’

It was Socrates who said ‘Know thyself’. Everyone should know his or her own strengths and weaknesses. Only then will they be able to face the battle of life with confidence. People in general know very little about themselves. Now you have an opportunity to think and find out about yourself and speak to your friends about your character and personality.

Oral Practice

Activity 1

Give specific answers to the following questions about your character, personality, attitudes, likes and dislikes. Your friends will react to your views either by defending them or opposing them. The interaction will thus lead to an open discussion.

1. What are you by nature? Express your views on each of these items:

Shy and reserved / sociable / aggressive
Confident/hesitant
Humble/proud
Calm and collected / sentimental and impulsive

2. How do you behave with other people?

Like to initiate talk with strangers / expect other people to talk to you first / prefer to be always surrounded by other people / like to have a lot of friends

3. Speak briefly about your sleeping habits.

Sleep more than eight hours at night / like to sleep / have a nap during the day / find it difficult to sleep at night

4. What is your attitude to work?

Like to be active during the day / love holidays / find it difficult to sit quietly / hate work / don't like to be lazy

5. How much attention do you pay to your appearance?

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Like to wear the latest outfits / prefer to dress in a simple manner / attend to your face before going out / attach importance to make-up / have your hair cut once a month

6. How practical are you?

Don't mind doing simple repairs at home / cannot mend anything / prefer to do simple jobs yourself / can fix just about anything

7. Which is the quality your friends like most in you?

Your honesty / your cheerfulness / your generosity / your willingness to help

8. How would you describe yourself?

Religious / active / practical / academic / jovial

9. Which of the following would you choose?

To have at least two friends / a number of acquaintances / just one friend / five or six friends

10. What would make you most uneasy?

Somebody praising you in front of others / being in a large crowd / people laughing at you / seeing somebody cry

11. Which would you like most to improve?

Your looks / your attitude to work / your social life / your interest in current affairs / your relationship with your family

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