Viva la Viva!
Towards an oral defence of student project-based presentations

This paper integrates oral communication, critical and creative thinking processes into student project-based presentations through an oral viva component. Caroline Mei Lin Ho believes that by engaging language learners in 'mini-viva' sessions based on students' project work, this will enable them to be appropriately stretched and sufficiently challenged through the rigour, challenge and motivation provided in defending one's work on projects.

Collaborative project work among language learners is increasingly becoming an integral part of the English Language or Language Arts curriculum (Flescher, 1998, Foresman, 2000, Tiedt et al., 2001). A growing recognition of the need to improve and integrate students' oral communication skills with written tasks based on projects is now evident as it is felt that the former is often neglected in favour of written project reports and summaries (Nur Hidayani, 2003). However, oral presentations in language classrooms have very often not gone beyond the mere 'show-and-tell' of students involved in projects, recounting procedures and general public speaking (ibid; Meyers and Holt, 2002, King, 2002; Parker, 2001).

Attention to a presenter's persuasive skills and the cognitive processes involved in convincing listeners of one's approach, by contrast, has received less emphasis. Indeed, a viva (oral defence) has traditionally been associated with doctoral candidates on the completion of research and submission of a written thesis. The call now is for classroom practitioners not to underestimate the role of such a practice in their own language classrooms if indeed the move is towards a forward-looking and appropriately challenging and motivating practice to improve language learners' communication skills and thinking processes, and to incorporate forms of assessment which focus on the processes involved and not merely the final product arising from projects.

There is value within the language classroom for oral defence to be integrated into the curriculum, particularly where
project work is involved. The ability to defend and argue convincingly based on work done in a specific area hones not only an individual's oral communication skills but also reinforces his or her thinking skills in being able to explain, describe, justify and articulate explicitly the rationale, reasoning and thinking processes behind the study. These skills are clearly as important, if not more critical, than the actual implementation and completion of the project work itself.

In Singapore, there is a current drive in the education system towards developing students' critical and creative thinking skills. One way in which this is realised is through the implementation of collaborative project work at various levels of education supplemented by oral presentations. Efforts are now under way for incorporating an oral defence component into project work. Specifically, this is a move towards equipping students with the necessary skills to not only present their research-based findings orally but also to argue convincingly and defend effectively their beliefs and position taken with respect to their projects. Teachers meet individual students in a viva session after projects have been submitted.

What follows is a suggested outline of sample project topics or areas of research followed by the steps and processes involved in introducing oral defence, or viva, into project-based work.

**Sample project topics or areas of research**

The following provides a suggested list of topics which teachers in Singapore have incorporated into their language classes:

- Proposing various methods of weighing an elephant.
- Investigating the best paper or material for making a paper airplane.

**Competency and skills**

The next section outlines the various levels of competency and specific skills involved, based on the following format:

A **area of focus (underlined)**,

B **suggested questions**,

C **and underlying principles and/or rationale (italics)**.

**A Zeroing in on the core of the field: In a nutshell**

B Someone steps up to you and asks you about the project you have been working on. In one sentence, what is your study/project/thesis?

C **Skills of synthesis, consolidation, going beyond surface summation, understanding the essence of the study.**

**A Encircling the field: Overview and summation**

B Summarise your key findings. What are the main points of your study?

C **Summation and providing an overview of issues/facts/findings.**

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**There is value within the language classroom for oral defence to be integrated into the curriculum...**

Developing ways of fostering greater inter-racial mix or integration among students in school.

Exploring various ways of helping a fellow classmate who has difficulty in physically moving around school.

Devising a gadget to help students plan their schedule and remember important messages.

Suggesting ways of enabling a student with poor eyesight to read small print in books.
A **Preparing the field:** Stimulating interest in the field

B **How did your interest in the topic come about?**

C **Development of personal interest in the area identified.**

A **Surveying the field:** Review of work

B **Are there presently other similar or related projects?**

**What are the missing links in existing studies/projects?**

**What are the present loopholes/limitations of existing work/studies?**

C **Breadth and depth (scope) of reading/research, awareness of what is available and what is lacking, being current and up-to-date.**

A **Narrowing the field:** Filling the missing gap or niche

B **How does your study fill the missing gap or niche (in relation to other available studies)?**

**What is significant about your study?**

**Is there anything special or unique, e.g. data collection, subjects?**

**What are the pre-requisites for carrying out the project?**

**Are there specific skills you require before embarking on this project?**

**Is there a particular area of background knowledge or study which you need to tap for the study?**

A **Setting out on the field:** Pre-requisites for carrying out the project

B **What are the pre-requisites for carrying out this project?**

**Are there specific skills you require before embarking on this project?**

**Is there a particular area of background knowledge or study which you need to tap for the study?**

C **Understanding the requirements and demands of study in terms of skills, knowledge involved.**

A **Defending the field:** Defending one's research methodology

B **Why did you carry out the project this way?**

**Why not another way?**

C **Ability to justify and defend one's research methodology.**

A **Adapting the field:** Adopting alternative methods, approaches or strategies

B **Looking back, what might you have done differently in the project?**

**Have you actually adapted or modified anything based on your original proposal? Reason(s) for doing so.**

C **Openness to possibilities and alternatives while defending what and how you did it at the time.**

A **Challenging or attacking the field:** Weaknesses of study

B **What do you consider to be the weaknesses of your study? Can you suggest ways to overcome these?**

C **Awareness of limitations, shortcomings, constraints and recommendations to overcome these.**

A **Extending the field:** Areas for further study or investigation

B **What further research/study does your work generate/stimulate/encourage?**

C **Extent to which your study is productive in generating further lines of inquiry or investigation.**

A **Ownership of the field:** Personal contribution

B **What is your personal contribution to the work of this project?**

C **Value and significance of the individual's input and contribution to the group effort.**

A **Profiting or not from the field:** Impact on students' learning

B **What have you gained from working on this project?**

**Identify the specific language skills which this project has helped you to develop.**
C Awareness of personal benefit and gains from working on this project.
A Marketing the field: Selling point of the project/study
B How would you motivate someone interested to carry out a related study in this area?
C Stimulating and generating interest in similar or related area of study.

A guide for language teachers

The table below provides information to guide language teachers interested in implementing the viva component into student project-based work. It is a sample evaluation form which can be adapted for use by teachers in assessing their students' performance.

Practice and mock vivas

It is recommended that students be given appropriate practice and sufficient time to be familiar and equipped with the necessary skills and procedure involved in mini-vivas. Mock sessions of oral defence could be scheduled towards the end of the teaching semester where carefully researched student projects may be used as examinable material as a base or focus.

_Ultimately, it is hoped, oral defence will develop fluent, mature and informed students, who present themselves as effective communicators._

Students would then be provided with the opportunity to practise the vital communication skills required in the oral defence exercise. Where appropriate, such sessions could be video taped for the benefit of other students as well, who could then view the recordings, and reflect on the processes and skills involved in such a process. Students could even be encouraged to generate their own assessment criteria or adapt and modify any pre-established assessment criteria, and engage in peer review of the sessions.

Conclusion

Incorporating an oral defence component in project-based work benefits language learners in more ways than one. It is process-oriented and learner-centred, with an integration of critical and creative thinking, and essential communication skills. Such practice holds the potential for adaptation for learners at secondary and even post-secondary or pre-university levels by building in increasingly progressive levels of difficulty in questioning and requirements at the higher levels.

Ultimately, it is hoped, oral defence will develop fluent, mature and informed students who present themselves as effective communicators with not only a sound and thorough knowledge of their own content area or project interest but who are, at the same time, able to convince, persuade and justify their own student-generated studies in a voice that is clearly their own with the three C's—clarity, conviction and confidence.

REFERENCES

Sample evaluation form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill/Competency</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shows knowledge of content/area of interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presents relevant ideas clearly and succinctly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to review and summarise key points</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to synthesise issue(s) into concise and succinct whole</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counters points raised confidently and professionally</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Justifies opinions/ideas with reason(s)/examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shows respect for opinions differing from presenter's own</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Acknowledges shortcomings/weaknesses/limitations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Able to recommend ways to overcome problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to adapt concepts/principles to new contexts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to new alternatives/other possibilities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows knowledge beyond own area of interest or focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Able to evaluate merits and demerits or work</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Displays overall professionalism and diplomacy in responding to questions posed</td>
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</tbody>
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