

Writing Preparation Outlines for Public Speaking in Tertiary Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to provide some ideas on the process of writing an outline for speech communication by undergraduate students at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Students face numerous problems in writing the outlines for their speaking task. Their initial hurdle is on the selection of an appropriate topic. Before selecting a topic, students would have to take into consideration the demographic factors of the target audience, their attitude and interest before writing the outlines. Besides, students need to determine the general purpose, specific purpose and the central idea of their speech. They should decide whether they are speaking to inform or to persuade their audience, and to write the outline that corresponds with the specific purpose of their speech. Students gather appropriate materials from various sources including surveys and interviews before they begin drafting their outlines. Although students are adept in collecting materials, there is an acute tendency in them to commit plagiarism. Apart from that, students should ensure that the materials gathered corroborate their stand on the topic. They should attempt to provide suitable examples, statistics and testimonies to convince their audience. Finally, they will have to decide on the organizational method that best fits their speech before writing the outlines.

INTRODUCTION

This presentation aims to provide some ideas and methods of writing the preparation outlines for Public Speaking in tertiary classrooms. Public speaking is one form of public communication (Sellnow, 2005). This particular paper is currently offered as English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course in the Faculty of Communication and Modern Languages of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Undergraduates from the various faculties have the option of selecting public speaking as one of the seven ESP courses offered by UUM. Throughout the course, undergraduates prepare and present a variety of speeches. This research will focus on the process of writing the preparation outlines for public speaking that will include the selection of topics, writing the specific purpose statement, the central idea, the introduction, the body, the main points, the sub points, the connectives and the conclusion.

Selection of Topics

Most of these undergraduates encountered some difficulty in the selection of suitable topics for their speech. 73% of the respondents who took part in the survey declared that they faced some form of difficulty in selecting the right topic. Given the freedom, they would prefer to choose topics that are too simple and trivial. 'Most people speak best about subjects with which they are most familiar', (Lucas, 2004 p. 87). Very few of the undergraduates would venture to select topics that are apparently compatible with their level of maturity or their cognitive potential. For instance, the majority of the students would prefer to select narrative topics, like stories related to their personal experiences or about some cultural functions and celebrations. Only a handful of them would dare to select expository topics that deal with theories, concepts, principles or facts. They feel that it is much easier to write on narrative topics than expository, descriptive, or argumentative type. 84% of the respondents preferred narrative topics whereas only 16% of them selected expository. These undergraduates fear that if they were to choose such challenging or daunting topics, they might end up scoring a lower grade of achievement in the assessment. This apprehension is mainly based on them having a low self-esteem in learning the English Language. They think that they would not be able to cope with such topics that demand a high level of English language competency.

Gathering Materials

The next stage in the development of writing the preparation outline for speech communication is gathering materials through primary and secondary sources. Here, students have a wide range of facilities and possibilities. They are at liberty to do library research from books, articles, magazines or journals. The other option is to navigate the Internet by visiting the various databases and websites with the objective of downloading information related to their topics. Some enterprising students would undertake to interview famous personalities like celebrities, prominent businessmen, renowned corporate figures from big companies and cartels, in an attempt to gather authentic materials with a view not only to garner greater audience response but also to score higher grades for their outstanding effort.

Although students are adept at gathering materials to write out their preparation outlines, there is a great tendency in them to reproduce materials per se without appropriate reference or acknowledgement. As it is, students are often reprimanded for committing global or patchwork plagiarism. Members of the academy are serious in curbing this matter and stern action is often meted out to such offenders.

Audience Analysis

The third stage in writing the speech is that students would have to take into consideration the type of audience they are going to address. 'An audience analysis is the process of customizing your speech to your specific audience', (Verderber & Verderber,

2006 p.67). Some prior knowledge of the demographic factors and psychological characteristics of the target audience would be of great advantage to the students in writing out the outlines of their speeches. Good public speakers would attempt to create a bond with their audience by emphasizing common values, goals, and experiences. For instance, information about the age group, gender, education, group affiliation, traits and socio-cultural background of the audience and their state of mind would help the students to strategize the writing process of the speech. Communicative scholars call this identification, (Osborn & Osborn, 2006). Furthermore they add, “A good audience analysis will help you determine what your listeners may already know about your topic, what they need to know, and how they feel about it”, (Osborn & Osborn, 2006 p.105).

Writing the Preparation Outline

The fourth stage is writing the preparation outline of the speech. ‘Outlining is a systematic process of placing ideas in a recognizable pattern that listeners can easily follow’, (Sellnow, 2005 p.222). By this time, the students are expected to have gathered enough information in accordance with the general purpose statement (GPS) of their speeches. By general purpose, it is meant here whether the student is, for instance, going to present his speech for information, persuasion or argumentation.

Having decided on this matter, the students move on to determine the specific purpose statement (SPS), and the central idea (CI), of their speech. Although some students manage to write out the specific purpose statement in the right way, they face considerable problems in writing the central idea correctly. The study revealed that 87% of the respondents had difficulty in writing the central idea (CI) correctly. The central idea is often referred to as the thesis statement of the speech. By convention, the central idea should be written clearly in one full sentence with all the main points in it. The main points are the central features of the speech, (Lucas, 2003). This requirement debilitates the students. Students find great difficulty in writing the central idea in one grammatically correct sentence. Apart from that, low proficiency students are often confused in the determination of the main points. 45% of the respondents stated that they faced complications in identifying the main points.

The next stage consists of writing out the content of the speech. Perhaps at this stage the students would have to ascertain the strategic order of the speech. For instance, is the speech going to be presented in chronological, spatial, or problem solution order, or is it going to be in the form of cause and effect relationship? Once this factor is resolved, the students move on to writing the outline. The outline should contain at least the three main elements of the speech namely: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion.

The introduction, for instance, should be written in such a manner that it should startle the audience to capture their interest and attention, establish the speakers’ credibility and preview the main points of the speech. ‘Another technique that can be used for introduction is to ask a rhetorical question ... not intended to elicit an actual response ,

but to stimulate your audience to think about the topic', (McManus, 1998, p.17). According to the study, 35% of the respondents were in a predicament to determine the appropriate introduction for their speech. The body of the speech, which consists of the bulk of the content, should be spiced up with relevant examples, testimonies and, if possible, with the latest statistical data. The conclusion should end with a suitable quotation or a clincher, like a final statement that reinforces the main ideas. 'It is often the part of speech that the audience remembers most clearly, (DeVito, 1994, p.220). Most students are capable of handling this aspect of the writing assignment, because it is a matter of adapting paraphrasing and paragraphing the content, based on the materials gathered. Although students are capable of writing the contents well, they do find some level of difficulty in using suitable transitions and connectives to link their points and ideas together and present them as a cohesive piece of work. The study revealed that 19% of the respondents encountered problems in using the right connectives and transitions. 'Oral communication requires coherence or logical connection of ideas', (Mckerrow et al., 2003, p.235).

The final stage is the writing of the bibliography and attaching the copies of relevant materials used as evidence of their research. The process of writing the preparation outline for speech communication is now complete.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that writing the preparation outline for speech communication appears to have a genre of its own, contrary to the norms of writing the common school-based essays. Tertiary students of public communication studies have to explore the attitude, interest, values, and beliefs of the audience to whom the speech is targeted. Besides that, they have to determine the purpose, the organizational method and the strategic order of their speech before writing the outlines.

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