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Speech-line

– a method for teaching oral presentation

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The Speech-line method to be described below allow for a rapid, effective and individually adapted development of specific speeches and for improving students' skills in oral presentation in general. The method is truly oral (not based on written manuscripts) and has an immediate focus on the live performance of the speaker, including non-verbal communication (body-language) and the use of the individual voice.

Learning outcome of activity

Strengthening the active rhetorical skills of students help them to present academic subjects in a clear and convincing manner. This is relevant not only for everyday classroom work, but also for oral exams, and for presenting research projects. In a wider academic and future perspective this will also be relevant when addressing colleagues at conferences - as well as for job-interviews and for pitching professional ideas.



*Students at Roskilde University engaged in a Speech-line exercise, September 2014
(Photo by the author).*

The Speech-line exercises are focused on developing the students' individual skills in oral presentation, but the exercises contribute also to an analytical and critical awareness of rhetorical performances in general in the media and in live settings. Thus working on students' practical skills in oral presentation very soon has a positive spill over effect into the learning objective category of knowledge: it strengthens the analytical and critical awareness of rhetorical tools and concepts. This again combined with the ability to speak one's mind in a variety of situations and in front of a variety of audiences will increase the personal competences of active citizenship.

The oral principle of the Speech-line method

The Speech-line method aims at improving skills in oral presentation, but it does not start with theory about how to write a good speech: it starts with speaking and developing the skills of speaking directly without (the most often distracting detour of) writing and memorizing a manuscript. This is different from the traditional approach in most textbooks about rhetoric and speech. First step in this new approach is on the floor and *live* performance: how to use voice and body – and the next steps include a variety of rhetorical resources to be used in

front of different listeners in order to obtain a positive contact and a possible productive communication.



Speech-line in a rhetoric workshop, Roskilde University, February 2015 (Photo by the author).

First of all the instructor (teacher) simply asks the students to stand up and form two rows (speech-lines) facing each other a few yards apart in the classroom. The point of departure here is what seems like an ordinary face-to-face oral communication situation where one student speaks to one other student about a self-chosen subject or about a theme decided by the instructor, like “What I like to do in my free time (hobby)” or “What I see as a major problem in the world today”. Public speaking in front of a large audience seems scary to most people, but talking just to one fellow student is a familiar situation and easy for students to handle without nervousness. So they can concentrate on explaining their point in a clear and convincing manner. The listening students are instructed to encourage a clear presentation and to insist on hearing everything well.

From there the students move on and speak each one to a new listener, they get feed-back, they develop their speech, and again move on, gradually improving content and form. Eventually they move on and try to give the speech in front of a group or a larger test-audience. This procedure takes advantage of the fact that most people, including young students as well as seasoned university professors, tend to become nervous, stiff, and generally less communicative when faced with a large audience, whereas everybody seems to know how to speak in a fairly interesting manner when relating to just one peer.

So the Speech-line method is using the semi-natural setting of a person-to-person address as a stepping-stone in order to help the speaker to develop form and content of the speech.

The actual wording is being developed on foot as you are talking to a person in front of you (not writing it down on paper just imagining an audience), and the gestures, mimics, posture and so on are from the very beginning understood to be integral parts of the communication. Focus is thus on the success of the situated communication, not on the perfection of abstract claims on paper.

Description of the Speech-line exercises in detail

The speech-line exercises can be conducted in different ways depending on the number, nature, and experience of the student groups. For new students having perhaps their first rhetoric workshop a typical procedure would be: two lines of students stand on the floor not too far apart, and with the other pairs of students also standing fairly close. The instructor presents a theme that all should be able to talk about, but the instructor leaves little time for reflection or objections, the speaking should begin immediately. Each one in line A gives a short draft version of their individual idea/speech to a partner in line B. This should be short, just half a minute or so. As the neighboring students are also speaking there will be quite a bit of noise to overcome, so each speaker has to be careful to speak up, to articulate well and to support the voice with suitable gestures and mimics. The partner listening may even say "Speak up" or "What?" or "Repeat that" as a first live feed-back. Then the line B students (the listeners in this first turn) retell what they heard and perhaps add suggestions to their partner in line A: what should be explained better or expanded on? Then the line B students give their first short speech - and receive some feed-back from their partners in line A.

The lines now move one notch, so that each participant gets a new partner (the student at the end of one row consequently has to run or dance all the way up to the other end to make the change fit - due to this "dancing" some students have nicknamed the speech-line "line-dance"). Then the line A students give their speeches again now in an improved and expanded version to the new partner, and the feedback process and development continues. With each turn the instructor can add new elements and challenges from the toolbox of rhetorical skills, e.g. ask the speakers to now include a very specific example like something that can be almost smelled or touched. Also it is often a good idea to ask the students to include a stronger pathos appeal or an ethos appeal.

If the class is not yet familiar with rhetorical concepts like these, one can just ask them e.g. to explain clearly in their speech why this topic is important to

themselves, or one can ask them to act as if they are really eager to convince the listener. The listener can also be instructed to come up with a very appreciative and participatory attitude, or, in some cases (more advanced), to come up with a very skeptical attitude. This way the speakers get to try different speaking conditions in a quick, easy and safe way. The instructor can also suggest including some metaphors or other figures of speech, to throw in a counter-argument and rebuttal, and even to try to change the order of the different elements in the speech, so that they start and end in a new way. It often comes as a surprise to the students how easy it actually is to improvise and change the order of the different elements as you please once you have a good overview of what you want to say.

After some turns when the speeches are fairly well developed it is often a good idea to make the students work together in the actual pairs in order to find a good slogan or sound-bite that captures the essence of each speech. For the next round it is then demanded that this sound-bite should be used as the opening line and as the concluding remark – and that it should also be used somewhere in the middle. Not to say that this is the final formula, but just to try out and demonstrate the power of having a catchy phrase repeated. If some students find it hard to come up with a good sound-bite they can just try to give their speech to the whole group, and then everybody can participate in this creative process. In the end it is naturally up to the speakers themselves to decide what to include and what not of the different suggestions; it is important that each student feel that they “own” their own speech. Giving a speech should not be like acting out a role in a theater, but it should be about saying what you mean and meaning what you say.



Hyde Park, London, May 2015. Students from Roskilde University practice with the Speech-line method just before their public speaking at Speaker's Corner. They all managed and spoke well (Photo by the author).

When working with older, more experienced students, Ph.d. students, or even university professors, the speech-line exercises should often follow a slightly different procedure in stead of building up an oral presentation element by element and gradually add more and more to the basic idea or argument. It is namely often the case that a "truly academic" speaker has too much to say, does not know where to begin or end, or what is most illustrative or understandable to a larger audience. Ph.d. students in my workshops have often claimed that they could not possibly describe their research field and basic problems in just half a minute. So obviously it would not be easy to use the normal additive procedure of the speech-line as describe above. But then the exercises just start the other way around: Line A gets to talk for about 5 minutes about their research subject or project – and then afterwards line B gives a short feed-back about what was understood and heard as the most essential. Then you try again with a new partner and gradually refine the presentation until the essence and structure becomes clear, with a nice illustration, perhaps even with a motto and other features of eloquence.

Experience, evaluation and reflections

The Speech-line method aims at developing speaking skills through direct *actio* exercises without the detour of writing. It is possible to take these exercises outside (if the weather is nice) and also to try out in different rooms, auditoriums and hallways. It all adds to the experience of speaking under different conditions. The exercises work well with a class of about 20 students, but larger numbers can easily be taught by just one experienced instructor, if just everybody agrees to keep some discipline and actually help each other. Students usually welcome this chance to give advice to each other, and they are usually very creative and resourceful once they get the chance.

Through these (most often very playful and enjoyable) *actio* exercises the participants learn how to overcome nervousness and awkwardness at the same time as they acquire a variety of rhetorical tools enabling them to clarify their points and their communication with different audiences.

Mastering oral communication is important in my opinion – also in the age of digital online media – and a prerequisite for democratic citizenship and participation. Teaching speech as a critical and productive competence should – also in my opinion – be taught and practiced more efficiently and in its own right at all levels of education.

The Speech-line method has been developed during my workshops and courses in rhetoric at Roskilde University during the last 10 years (bachelor, master, and Ph.D.-level, and very often with international students). The method has also been tested on university colleagues and on participants from outside the university world, and it has received very positive evaluations (also in anonymous, on-line evaluations arranged by the Board of Studies). The didactic principles involved have to some extent previously been described and published, as seen below in the selected bibliography. It should perhaps also be mentioned that the Speech-line method is based not just on experience but also on the principles of a phenomenological approach to language, knowledge, and communication, and that further documentation of this is in print (see below).

Selected bibliography:

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