

Gema Pérez-Sánchez
Foreign Languages and Literatures Department
501 Ashe Admin Building, Locator 4650

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Excellence in Teaching Award Entry

The Focused Five-minute Student Oral Presentation Enhanced with the World Wide Web and Blackboard

Technique's Primary Goals:

- To teach students how to convey information orally to their classmates in a concise yet effective manner.
- In foreign languages and literatures classes, specifically, to motivate students to learn to convey sophisticated information orally in the Target Language (TL) and to develop their speaking skills in the TL.
- To encourage students to search, to evaluate, and to choose international web resources (sites and journals on line) appropriate for a particular course's subject matter in their preparation for the oral presentation.

Technique's Bonus Goals:

- To teach students to develop their creative agency by giving them the opportunity to supplement the syllabus with an oral presentation on a topic of their choice, within parameters carefully crafted by the professor.
- To involve students actively in and make them responsible for the learning that occurs in the classroom.
- To have students use technology to teach the class in a controlled fashion.
- To encourage those students listening to the presentation to participate actively in making it a successful, collective learning event.

What Led Me To Develop This Technique?

The idea for the technique I describe below came out of my deep frustration with how students' oral presentations were working in my classes. In my training as a teacher of Spanish as a second language, of Hispanic literature and culture, and of writing across the curriculum, I was encouraged to include oral presentations in all of my classes. In principle, it is a commendable idea, one that most professors apply in their courses, regardless of the subject. The model that I learned in my training involved enabling students to be responsible for some of their own learning; assigning a specific topic to them supplementing the primary texts read in class with background information; and having them practice their public speaking skills (in English or the TL). The problem with this model, however, was that, in spite of my carefully crafted written instructions on how to do this type of oral presentation and my insistence that the student should not speak for more than ten to fifteen minutes, students (save a few unusually attentive ones) invariably delivered rambling, often incomprehensible (particularly if they were still struggling with the TL), boring presentations that failed to capture their classmates' or even my attention, regardless of how many visual aids they used. Inevitably, students often went over the allotted time. On many occasions, particularly if the students were struggling with Spanish or if they were particularly shy, I would not dare to interrupt their oral presentations because I was afraid to humiliate them, to make them feel bad about their oral skills in Spanish, or to render them reluctant to speak in Spanish in public ever again. I was often left with the feeling that oral presentations were a waste of time, that the students were gaining nothing of pedagogical value from them. These feelings were often corroborated by the students' feedback in their course evaluations, in which they would sometimes complain about the oral presentations, asserting that they were boring and hard to follow. I grew so

frustrated with oral presentations that, for a few years, I did away with them completely in my undergraduate classes.

But I thought there had to be a way for oral presentations to become productive, empowering class practices. I had to find a technique that would help students feel enthusiastic about their topics of presentation and to make their oral presentations engaging to their classmates. Also, I wanted to increase my language students' opportunities to practice their oral skills and, consequently, to make them feel increasingly comfortable and proficient participating in class discussions in the TL. This is particularly important in Spanish language and literature classes at UM, where, after their first 300-level course, non-native students enter courses with a mixed population of native and heritage speakers of Spanish. I felt responsible for helping my non-native students of Spanish reach the peak of their TL-speaking potential before they had to join their fluent native and heritage speaker colleagues in higher-level literature and culture courses.

Although this technique evolved specifically in Spanish language and literature courses, I believe it can be easily adapted to any other type of subject, including the sciences, as I explain later on. Furthermore, it has very few if any associated costs, as I explain below, since the technology needed already exists in and is readily available at UM.

Description of Technique:

Students receive the following instructions (posted on Blackboard, originally in Spanish):

Instructions for Five-Minute Oral Presentations

To the student doing the presentation:

For about two weeks before the date of your oral presentation, you are to follow **a topic of your choice** (politics, music, literature, film, etc.) in at least two different Spanish-language on-line newspapers from countries other than the U.S.A. You are particularly encouraged to follow not just news on the topic, but especially opinion pieces (editorials, cartoons). It would be especially effective if you could find dissenting opinions from, for example, both conservative and progressive on-line newspapers. You will find two portals to a variety of on-line newspapers from Spanish-speaking countries in the "External Links" section of Blackboard. Alternatively, copy and paste the following URLs to your browser's URL window:

Centro Virtual Cervantes (Journals, Magazines, Radio Stations in Spanish)
http://cvc.cervantes.es/oteador/default.asp?l=2&id_rama=156&ct=catalogo156

University of Texas, Latin American News Sources (by country)
<http://www1.lanic.utexas.edu/la/region/news/indexesp.html>

Topics may include but are not limited to the perception of the U.S.A. in the Hispanic world; particular political events that affect Hispanic countries (e.g., elections, free trade, guerrilla attacks, labor strikes, political demonstrations and protests); the U.S. presence in Iraq and how different Spanish-language newspapers respond to it; the Hispanic press's coverage of a particular musician or band's tour abroad; the reception of U.S. music or films in Spanish-speaking countries; etc.

Three days before your class presentation, you should e-mail the professor the URL for at least four web links to opinion pieces and news that you find particularly important or salient to understanding the topic that you will present in class. The professor will load these links on to Blackboard>External

Links>Student Oral Presentations to make them available to all your classmates before your oral presentation.

In class, you will present a brief summary—five minutes sharp: no more, no less—of what you have learned in your two-week follow up. The oral presentation should generally respond to the following questions:

- What topic have you chosen and why?
- What are the most controversial aspects of this topic and why?
- Which on-line news sources have you been following?
- What are each journal's attitudes towards the topic you have been following?
- What ideological or political tendencies do each of these journals represent? (This will be particularly obvious in their opinion sections.)
- What has surprised you the most about how each journal has reported on the topic? Why?

[In computer-mediated classrooms with Internet connections, the student should refer to specific aspects of the web pages during the actual presentation]

You should practice delivering your oral presentation before coming to class: our Spanish tutors (in MB 204; see schedule on Blackboard) are available to listen to you practice. You should also feel free to come to my office hours to ask particular questions about vocabulary and pronunciation. I particularly encourage you to check periodically with—me as you prepare your presentation—about grammatical correctness.

You may use flash cards to aid you, but under no circumstances should you read your presentation verbatim from a piece of paper. One of the important goals of this activity is for you to practice your spoken Spanish in a formal setting. Remember, it is JUST a 5-minute presentation on a topic you enjoy.

The professor will subtly indicate to you when you are running out of time by flashing first a card with the number 1 on it, to indicate that you have 1 minute left; then, she will flash another card with the number 30 on it, to warn you that you only have 30 seconds left and that you should wrap up your presentation.

After your presentation, your classmates and the professor will ask you specific questions on the topic and the links you provided.

Your oral presentation's grade will be calculated thus:

Organization	30%
Quality and interest of content	30%
Clarity of expression and exposition	40%

To the rest of the students listening to the presentation:

Three days before each oral presentation, you will have access on Blackboard>External Links>Student Oral Presentations to several web links provided by one of your classmates. Peruse these links and prepare at least one question you would like to ask of your classmate who will give the oral presentation.

Follow-up to the Activity and Anecdotal Information about the Success of This Technique:

As the student is delivering his or her presentation, I take two types of brief notes: (1) I record particularly felicitous uses of sophisticated vocabulary in the TL or especially interesting facts that the student has unearthed in his or her research and that I want to emphasize to the whole class because of their relevance to the course topic; (2) I note grammatical, lexical, or conceptual problems that I later on discuss in private with the student to help him or her correct them. After the presentation and the Q&A period, I write on the board those especially successful aspects of the presentation. In language courses, in particular, I build on the new vocabulary presented by the student to further enrich everybody's learning experience. For example, recently, a student used in his oral presentation the word *agricultura*, which, although not new to the class, is somewhat difficult to pronounce and not the usual kind of term an intermediate language student would readily use. I wrote the word boldly in the middle of the board, and I mapped the related semantic field with help from all students. We ended up with a very complete list of vocabulary words related to agriculture which, furthermore, was very appropriate for the literary text we were about to discuss in the next two class periods (a selection from Isabel Allende's novel *La casa de los espíritus*, in which an earthquake wreaks havoc in an agricultural community).

Thus, by combining the 5-minute presentation, the 5-minute Q&A, and the 5-minute lexical review, I am able to encourage more pro-active and productive collective student involvement than I ever used to get with the old-style oral presentation, which also took up about 15 minutes or more, but yielded less pedagogically satisfactory results.

The students' favorite oral presentation topics are, of course, popular cultural ones. In particular, I remember a very successful presentation on Colombian singer Juanes' benefit concert for victims of the guerrilla violence in Colombia. The student followed opinion pieces on this event in two rival Colombian newspapers and was able to relate the musician's creative activities to his political engagement. Furthermore, the student also provided the class with a web link to musical samples from Juanes, which her classmates enjoyed thoroughly. The presenter gained confidence and practice in speaking Spanish and earned a high grade on the assignment, while pursuing a topic of great interest to her. Meanwhile, her classmates not only learned about Colombian politics and culture, but they also did so in a way that was accessible and enjoyable to them. In fact, the whole student group bonded over their love for certain cross-over Latino/a music sensations (e.g., Juanes, Shakira, Enrique Iglesias). The students burst into a spontaneous, animated class debate *in Spanish* about the merits of each of their favorite Latino/a musicians. It was a thoroughly successful learning and bonding activity for all.

When I first started using this new technique, I did not ask the student-audience to bring prepared questions for the presenter, but it soon became obvious to me that this was a necessary step to create a more informed, attentive audience who would more actively engage with the presenter. Now that I include this important step, students in the audience find their peers' presentations more accessible, and presenters are rewarded with a sense that their classmates have taken the time to partake in their interests.

All of the goals that I stated at the beginning of this narrative are easily achievable with this technique for oral presentations. Students have responded enthusiastically to my new model: it enables them to feel engaged with the materials on the class syllabus because they gain the opportunity to share with their classmates and to incorporate into the course itself a topic of their own interest. Since I started implementing this technique for oral presentations in my classes, my students' enthusiastic involvement with Spanish and Hispanic culture has increased substantially. Furthermore, I always encourage students who might be shy or a bit scared of speaking in public to practice a lot (even to memorize some parts) before delivering their presentations. Because they have chosen topics that they enjoy, they are more committed to practicing beforehand and achieving a high degree of preparation before sharing their work with their peers. Finally, my students' narrative evaluations of my courses have improved, too. Students now write comments such as "the course content is excellent"; "Everything done in the course has strong

relevance”; and “I learned a lot from this course and I am very pleased.” This new technique for designing oral presentations has greatly improved my classes both from my own and my students’ perspectives.

Adaptability of This Technique to Other Fields and Its Feasibility:

I started using this technique for oral presentations two years ago in my SPA 212 course (Intermediate Spanish II). This is a computer-mediated course taught in MB 204, a computer lab. Each student has access to a computer terminal with an Internet connection (for a total of 14 students). This is an ideal circumstance for this type of activity: the class atmosphere is particularly intimate and less intimidating; the computers and Internet connection in the classroom allow the student doing the presentation to refer his or her classmates on the spot to particular sections in the links s/he has provided. However, because our campus is now a WiFi environment, this technique could easily be transferred to any classroom, provided the professor brings to class a laptop with WiFi connectivity. Furthermore, this type of oral presentation would work with classes with up to 50 students, where students do the oral presentation in English and not in a foreign language. In fact, computers in the classroom are not even necessary. Students can do all the technology-mediated work before coming to class, for example, at Richter Library or from the comfort of their own computers. Therefore, there is really no cost involved in putting this technique into practice.

In addition, I can easily imagine adapting this technique to a science class in which the professor provides links to important academic journals and asks students to follow a particular topic (e.g., the role of ocean currents in global warming) in two different journals. Alternatively, a science professor might ask students to follow news stories related to the class in mainstream popular newspapers or news magazines.

This technique can also be adjusted to work in courses at different levels. For example, I expand the five-minute limit to ten minutes for more advanced courses, and I require the presentations to include more substantial content (specifically in 500-level courses). In higher-level classes, I also vary the activity slightly: instead of asking students to follow a topic through on-line newspapers and other news media, I specify academic journals or other types of academic links, and I ask them to choose a topic more tailored to the course (e.g., anything related to the Spanish artistic, literary, and musical avant-garde; or anything related to the new challenges presented by recent waves of illegal immigration in Spain from Latin America, North African and Sub-Saharan African countries; etc.).

The greatest challenge that this activity presents, particularly in language courses, is assuaging the fears of the shyest or most insecure students so that they eventually feel comfortable speaking in public in the TL. This requires that the professor be non-threatening to and supportive of the students so that they feel comfortable visiting him or her often during the preparation of their oral presentation. Thus, the professor can guide the student to gain self-confidence in his or her abilities to speak publicly in a foreign language. Alternatively, for non-language courses taught in English, the professor should exert care not to intimidate shy students and should discuss different presentation techniques to avoid stage fright. Nevertheless, this challenge is relatively minor and requires little effort in comparison to the satisfactory rewards and the improved pedagogical productivity that this manner of organizing students’ oral presentations provides.