THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PUBLIC SPEAKING COMPONENT IMPLEMENTATION INTO THE CURRICULA OF THE FUTURE SPECIALISTS IN INTERNATIONAL LAW AND JOURNALISM BY THE EXAMPLE OF MONTHLY CONFERENCE LET'S TALK

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Abstract

The modern conditions of global digitalization urge the necessity for the new approaches in foreign language instruction which would match the learning style of digital natives born in the age of smart technologies and telecommunication. Modern language learners, university students in particular, can be considered easily self-taught provided that the topics studied fall within the scope of their interests. With a view to enhancing the process of English language acquisition by university students, the teaching staff of MGIMO University developed a range of steps necessary to stimulate social action and interaction in a language rather than their own paying sufficient attention to modern learners' cognitive habits.

The paper highlights a teacher-student project LET's Talk monthly hosted by MGIMO University as a platform meeting current educational requirements for authenticity and intellectuality and featuring public speaking as a key skill for future professionals. Public speaking develops both academic and social abilities, creating natural hunger for knowledge, which can present a viable solution for a range of higher education curricula. Matching almost any university program, this format provides the freedom to rediscover academic topics through the prism of learners' interests, stimulating students' work on public speaking skills in their pursuit of eloquence.

A practice of implementation of a course of English based on public speaking is described in the article as the second year of the project has been completed by the professors and students of Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University).

The idea behind LET's Talk MGIMO is to put the theory they received at university into the practice they can experience - the development against the background of digital preferences characteristic of today's learners. The project itself is also viewed as a training platform for students of PR department, the space where they latter can try the methods acquired tailoring them to the specific needs and conditions of a social event.

Designed as an extracurricular activity for those wishing to enhance their foreign language acquisition and to find an opportunity of extra speaking practice, LET's Talk MGIMO now welcomes around 100 participants annually. The key aspects of the project implementation considered, the authors conclude with a series of practical recommendations suitable to facilitate a range of similar activities for teaching staff and students willing to engage in public speaking.

Keywords: public speaking, language learning, foreign speech, university study, innovative learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of acquiring and furthering some practical/down-to-earth speaking skills by journalism and international relations students is widely discussed in academic society. Nevertheless, the issue of the embodiment of some spontaneous or prepared speech into the full-time curriculum at universities remains unresolved. Within the framework of academic study future specialists obtain and apply some valuable theoretical knowledge for further operation in the field of their expertise. However, apart from some negotiation techniques, ways of persuasion and manner of speaking patterns, international workers must be able to adjust the information and bring it home for a wide range of audiences. Still, without proper practice and experience of interacting, the process of second language acquisition is significantly slow [1].

Despite the technological advances, modern pace of life in metropolitan and multinational cities shifts global academic attention towards the development of social communication and soft skills. Human interaction has always played a vital role in any sphere of expertise but in modern society in the era of

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TED Talks, the era of videoblogging, open lectures and personal coaching, people are likely to trust someone's personal experience more if it is delivered clearly, concisely, and backed properly.

Thus, public speaking is supposed to be an equally important element of the language learning process. Many books, articles, tutorials and workshops highlight a number of areas of particular concern for the students of journalism and international relations. The most significant of these are now discussed.

In his lecture on spontaneity Adrian Underhill said: "Students are much more engaged in the material when they are engaged in conversations that they are part of, like engaging in a lovely secret!" [2]. With this in mind, the organizers of LET's Talk MGIMO do not impose restrictions on topics or fields of knowledge speakers choose to discuss. A special caution is needed when some religion- or nationality-bound topics are proposed by potential participants. Given that speakers' interest in the topic chosen is a prerequisite for a successful performance, the organizers' team task is to pay extra attention to potentially conflicting ideas and make them sound (if uttered) more agreeable to the ear of an average member of the audience.

Given that the project is viewed as almost free of competition, the aspect of competition in education should also be considered. Adapting the format of a university public speaking event to the one of famous TED Talks conferences, the organizers tried to preserve the atmosphere in which each speaker is considered unique and treated like a winner, regardless of his manner, presentation style, or his fluency.

Some elements of competition can be used as a means to encourage students in a positive way, though. As it should not imply negative stress on the participants, the whole process of speech preparation and speech delivery should be free of grading [3]. It can include cooperation and friendly competition, though. A good way to achieve this is to divide the students within teams, and allocate the responsibility for certain aspects of each performance among the team members. A course leader may ask potential participants to work in close cooperation with those who already have positive experience of participation in the project. With a view to promoting cooperation paired with friendly competition, a leader can organize several teams which would include the speaker himself as well as his "assistants" responsible for some constituents of a performance, such as presentation, light, timing of rehearsals, style, etc. Introduced this way, competition does not presuppose any stress typically caused by rivalry and provides for mutual respect and assistance among the members of the community.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Methodology of project organization

The successful organization of the project operation presupposes determining the target audience of the performances as well as a number of requirements to the speakers of the initiative. There are no restrictions concerning participants' age, field or year of study. However, most of them, due to the origin of the project, are students of MGIMO University and already advanced users of English (CEFR C1/C2). The participants' fluency in the language is vital for delivery of high-quality speech, nevertheless, it is not a key factor, as it is essential that the participants have enough time and wish to work on their speeches in both directions.

First of all, it must be thoroughly planned and developed, as the structure of the message, as well as its layout, must be clear, accurate and concise. At the frequent rehearsals, potential speakers willingly enrich the content of the presentation with the vocabulary and advanced grammatical structures they have mastered during classes. Moreover, future participants have some time restrictions to observe: the speech per se should last from 6 to 8 minutes. This inflames speakers' urge to cherry pick the examples to back the statement of the speech and stops them from overwhelming it with repetitious or cases of weak argumentation. The founders of the project advise avoiding topics of religion and politics as not all the students might have enough knowledge and experience of the acute subjects.

Secondly, despite the fact that public speaking implies spontaneity, it is the quality that must be initially developed in both native and foreign languages. At the rehearsals, potential performers practice a number of persuasive techniques and the ways they can interact with the audience. One of the key benefits of group rehearsals is peer assessment that helps to improve the original idea, approaching it from different perspectives, which in turn leads to novelty and creativity. As a rule, it encourages "deep learning", develops flexible assessing criteria which they use to estimate their own speeches. While practicing, students try to observe the new language trends as well as develop their soft skills.

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Moreover, the project was designed as a mutually beneficial platform for both the speakers and the team of students who launched the initiative. Being set up at the International Journalism faculty it serves the purposes of Public Relations (PR) study. The platform provides a unique opportunity to try out the theoretical knowledge MGIMO students have gained studying the subjects of the curriculum that give them sufficient knowledge in PR and enable them to feel confident about putting techniques into practice. The organization is rather sustainable due to the inherent wish of the speakers and the managers to collaborate. They investigate the process of conducting events, communication, negotiations, advertising and marketing, everything starting with the logo design and hosting public pages to promo events and celebrities' endorsement. The team includes students of different specializations: International Journalism, Public Relations and Sociology. They develop the conference in varied directions: social networks (Instagram, Facebook and VKontakte) where they post articles related to the issue of public speaking, YouTube channel – including promo videos and the conferences themselves. Future specialists rise the project awareness within the university and students community by a broad advertising campaign and the involvement of the specialists from different walks of life: businessmen, PR managers, writers, musicians, influencers, professors, actors, film producers, bloggers, photographers.

The aim of the project is to prepare future international workers for speaking tasks of different complexity, including spontaneous ones. Participants are trained to express their ideas and give clear supportive arguments, avoid repetitions, think on feet and articulate, put stress and intone the sentences, use and control their body language confidently. The format of the project is set to help the participants enhance their communicative skills in a language other than their own and expand their knowledge of competencies required for future professional activity. This encouraged the organizers to set a range of tasks with the following aims:

- further stimulation of student interest in English language studies
- development of creative potential and expansion of cultural competencies
- enabling students to gain experience as public speakers
- 'revitalising' extracurricular activity
- encouraging students to think creatively
- extending the ability to work responsibly on all the aspects of presentation (visual support, context, gestures, speech novelty, layout and persuasive techniques)
- creating an opportunity for students to have an alternative assessment of their knowledge.

Apart from some practical use, the skills honed can be employed during the exam preparation process, moreover, they are universal for any language.

2.2 Methodology of progress assessment

Public speaking is said to be quite similar to presentation, with the difference being the fact that latter is usually meant for commercial or academic environment [4]. As the purpose of the project is to foster students' creativity by giving them some freedom of choice and ability to improve the language skills acquired within the framework of the academic curriculum, the potential speakers do not compete against one another and peer assessment is applied at every stage of the preparation. As opposed to most extra-curriculum initiatives, LET's Talk MGIMO does not imply any extra grades for the participation. Participants work together at the first stage of preparation discussing and forging the idea for the presentation. The teamwork encourages potential speakers to become independent and more confident in their researches. The role shifting at the peer assessment process gives them an opportunity to have different perspectives on speaking criteria, which leads to the improved performance. The creative nature speaking activity as a social phenomenon allows teachers' mentoring to have only consultative, advisory role at all stages of preparation.

The language proficiency is analyzed primarily in terms of the usage of complex accurate grammatical structures, extended vocabulary ra the usage of linking devices and the general knowledge of grammar and advanced vocabulary, as well as coherence and the quality of mistakes. Though initial language skills requirements are loose, the speech criteria are more precise and specified by the topic as well as the target audience.

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3 RESULTS

While working on their performances the participants had an opportunity to be involved in various tasks that are key to their future careers in journalism and international relations. It was particularly helpful for those students who were undecided on their future choice or those wishing to have some extra language practice.

Since its beginning in 2018 the conference has been held monthly, each taking 90 minutes: 8 speakers and a special guest have 8 minutes each to deliver the speech. For 2 years at LET's Talk MGIMO conference speakers have highlighted a great variety of topics:

- Art
- Music
- Journalism
- Technologies
- History
- Psychology
- Translation and language issues
- Social problems
- Ecology
- International relations.

The conference has hosted more than 124 students-speakers, some of them went on to become video-bloggers, TV hosts, environmental activists, coaches. Apart from 8 key speakers, within the period of its existence, the project has featured 12 special guests (4 native speakers), among which there are film directors, writers, actors, journalists, sportsmen, PR practitioners driven by the desire to shed light on certain aspects of their profession. The founders of the initiative Kristina Stepanyan and Natavan Mammadova conducted more than 200 rehearsals and auditions. Let's Talk MGIMO team have organized 10 workshops for the participants and those who are interested in public speaking, conducted 8 interviews with experts and people whose work is related to performing and speaking in front of big audiences. In April 2018 TEDx Talks in both the Russian and English languages was organized. Since 2018 there have been a few collaborations with the scientific student clubs and some charity work has been organized. A few articles including Forbes Russia and Babyer Magazine have highlighted the benefits of the project both for its participants and the audience. In addition, students of the faculty of international journalism have written 3 articles devoted to the key aspects of public speaking and storytelling.

In addition, the overall positive attitude of speakers towards classes is noted. Their academic grades before the participation, during the month of speech preparation and after the conference were taken for consideration and analyzed by the authors. The same student's rating after the participation is approximately 4% higher, so there is a persistent rise in grades among MGIMO speakers noted after the speech delivery. If the interviewee was not a MGIMO student, the person's academic progress was not assessed and is not included into the result featured in this research. However, in their references, the speakers mention a significant enhancement in motivation and creativity.

Table 1. The results of the survey conducted among the participants of LET's Talk MGIMO conference.

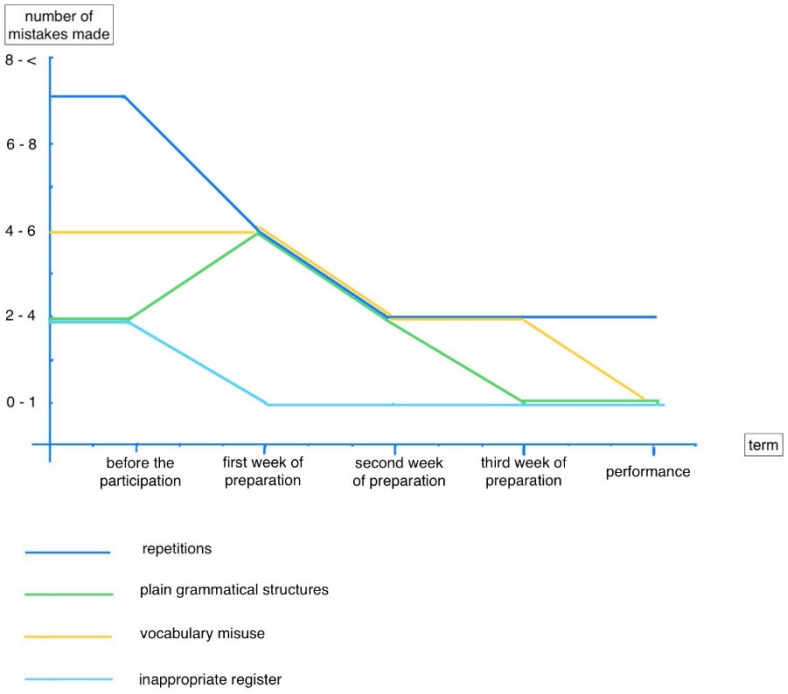
	before participation	***after the first time participation***	***after the second time participation***
the academic progress	76-80	78-83	78-84
the number of mistakes and their quality	5-6 minor grammar and vocabulary mistakes	3-4 minor grammar and vocabulary mistakes	2-3 minor grammar mistakes
the usage of advanced vocabulary items pre 8 minutes	2-3	3-4	5-6
the usage of accurate advanced grammar constructions pre 8 minutes	2-3	4-5	4-5
the fluency of speech	incomplete sentences, a lot of pauses, attempts to commit the whole speech to the memory	still there is some hesitation, but less pauses	almost no pauses, the speech is confident and delivered at a natural pace

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This progress can be considered a major enhancement resulting in overall positive attitude towards learning a foreign language, creating an impetus to trim it into perfection and deliver speeches in it.

Moreover, a solid speakers' community is formed, where the desire to listen, hear and be heard creates a perfect background for language learning and further practice, free of negative criticism and tough competition.

A survey conducted by the organizers of the project proves its positive impact on learners' ability to analyze mistakes and the amount of time it takes to reduce and minimize them. The following graph depicts the process of improvement in terms of commonly made mistakes. Such minor mistakes and problems as a lack of synonyms, simple sentence structures, misuse of vocabulary, and inapt style of speech are considered. The graph shows the results of a month's term.



Although the line graph illustrates the progress within the framework of one conference, some participants who then took part in further events show comparatively higher results at all subsequent conferences.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Speaking is one of the primary skills which is developed naturally. Introducing the aspect of speaking, no matter what language is taught, is not an easy task. No doubt, mastering the art of speaking is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a communication in that target language [5]. Despite its spontaneous nature, public speaking per se can easily become a supplementary part of an academic curriculum. It actively encourages students to meet both social and academic requirements by employing their inherent curiosity and interest in human interaction. Preparation activity is mutually beneficial: as the project is sustainable and all-sufficient, it does not imply teachers' full-time involvement; at the same time being personally interested in the outcome students do their best to improve their language skills. LET's Talk MGIMO project provides additional motivation to language acquisition showing practical value of this communicative technique. The advantage of such non-competitive activities like the aforementioned one is that they create an opportunity for students from different universities to build rapport working in close collaboration. Comfortable working environment set the stage for supportive, creative and reliable atmosphere. This should facilitate the general process of learning and motivate students to collaborate with the tutors of the university, make the learners stay task-oriented and spend more energy on doing their work rather than worrying about what others are doing. Extra speaking activities for those who learn the language outside the language environment are of paramount importance as they create a longing for communication.

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