

# HIGHER EDUCATION RESPONSE TO DIGITAL SOCIETY CHALLENGES

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Nowadays, higher education is facing digital society challenges; one of them is poor soft skills development. More and more employers admit that the development of the internet and the extensive use of social networks have made it difficult to find employees able to talk properly in real life situations. University graduates start their first jobs and are either too afraid to speak with customers or fail to communicate their ideas clearly. Recently, there has been an increasing number of job advertisements emphasizing the importance of well developed soft skills. Employers are now looking for graduates able to build professional and long-lasting business relationships with customers and colleagues; to remain coherent when delivering information, and to maintain positive attitude when dealing with customers.

To help our students meet employers' requirements and become a part of the current global business environment; we aim to provide them with opportunities to perfect the following soft skills:

- **Active listening skills:** Teaching our students active listening skills, we intend to develop their ability to listen, understand and consider their counterpart's point of view, as well as establish rapport with the person speaking. As our students use their second language to communicate, it is a wonderful opportunity to practice paraphrasing, questions and appropriate vocabulary for clarifying.
- **Written communication skills:** With the amount of international business correspondence growing, it is highly important to develop students' ability to create reader-friendly documentation and deliver messages in a structured and comprehensive manner.

- Oral communication: According to numerous research data, people's attention span is decreasing, making the ability to articulate ideas and convey information in a clear and concise manner an absolute must.
- Interpersonal skills: It must be pointed out that a great number of employers consider interpersonal skills one of the top criteria to evaluate job applicants. The ability to build positive day-by-day interactions with customers and collaborate effectively with colleagues or business partners can help motivate teams, increase productivity, and manage conflict.
- Teamwork skills: If we ask our students to define teamwork, they often answer: "Oh, it is simple. Just work together." And when given a task to find a solution to a problem, solve a puzzle, or make a short report being randomly assigned to teams, they start complaining. Usually, students are not satisfied with other team members missing deadlines or their lack of ability to compromise, so students tend to complete tasks on their own. Thus, it is essential to help students understand that in teamwork the joint effort to get results is more important than achieving individual goals.
- Presentation skills: A good/competent presenter is a skilful storyteller, someone who has practised and perfected a whole set of soft skills in order to be able to gain and retain audiences' attention, to convey information verbally in a concise manner, to achieve goals desired. While gathering data and preparing for the actual delivery of the presentation, students have to apply reading, writing, speaking and listening skills; that is why we devote a certain amount of time to develop our students' presentation skills. According to Girard, Pinar и Trapp, the potential benefits of class presentations include greater class interaction, increased interest in learning, new perspectives, and improvement in communication skills [1].

Nowadays, a great deal of information on presentation making and delivering is available online as well as in a comprehensive range of English language teaching course books. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the fact that our students

were not particularly good at presentations, therefore, we decided to design an integrated system to build up and polish our students' presentation skills.

As is well-known, the effectiveness of any presentation depends on certain factors, among them, the personality of the person delivering the presentation, the positivity of the target audience, the range of presentation methods in use. The way presenters are dressed, the loudness or the pace of their speech, the gestures used can either help to win the audience or hamper the initial interest. As the proverb says, first impressions count, making the right start of the presentation is crucial. To help our students overcome possible difficulties, we begin our work on presentation skills development with the discussion of some common mistakes made by inexperienced presenters. To facilitate the discussion, we use funny images printed in Commerce course book published by Oxford University press [2]. Then, we ask our students to complete exercises from Economics for Everyone course book which was designed by the teachers of our university [3]. These exercises are grouped to train every part of the presentation and provide all the vocabulary necessary for structuring and delivering the presentation in English. It should be noted, that particular attention is paid to the vocabulary used to describe slides and graphs. To practice the vocabulary, students are asked to complete a number of exercises; matching, gap-filling, logical grouping, putting in order are among them. Most of the exercises are accompanied by audio recordings.

In addition to audio recordings, we demonstrate a number of video clips providing our students with a chance to analyse successful or ineffective presentation delivery, different presentation techniques, use of jokes and real life examples. When, at the next step, our students are assigned with a task to prepare and deliver a part of a presentation, they are asked to record and then listen to their presentation at home prior to delivering it in class. It is no surprise, that after listening, some of the students start over with the task, this time working much harder and applying much more effort.

When our students are equipped with all the information necessary, they are formally invited to a master class prepared by our teachers. As many of our students would like to study English in the UK, the presentation is devoted to English language vacation courses available for international students in summer. To make the presentation feasible, a real language school is presented, and the school website is used to handle students' questions during the question and answer session [4]. This presentation is carefully designed to demonstrate both an effective presentation and a terrible one. Before the presentation start, students are assigned with the task to listen to both presenters and identify any mistakes made. During the presentation, the information is, first, delivered by a terrible presenter who comes to the classroom looking indifferent and bored. Speaking very quietly, making a lot of mistakes, breaking almost all of the presentation rules and lifting students' brows, the first presenter demonstrates how not to behave. And then the students are shown an effective presentation made by a second presenter. At the end of the class students are encouraged to summarise and elaborate on both presentations. Usually students find this class very useful as the one providing real life experience.

At the final stage, the students make presentations on new products, services or start-up companies of their choice. Students of other academic groups are invited to play the roles of investors ready to provide funding. The presenters are informed that they are giving the presentations to potential investors and prepare accordingly. After the presentations, the investors make their choice carefully explaining their reasons.

When discussing the series of classes devoted to soft skills development, in general, and to the presentation skills development, in particular, students highlight the valuable experience of public speaking, presenting ideas and practising business communication skills they receive. We believe that the soft skills our students perfect during our classes will help them obtain higher

university grades, appear confident during job interviews with potential employers, gain respect of colleagues, and succeed in their future careers.

1. Girard, Tulay, Musa Pinar, and Paul Trapp. Class Presentations and Peer Evaluations: Do Students Perceive the Benefits? *The Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*. -2011- № 15 (1).- С. 77-94.

2. *Commerce 2: Student's Book.*/ Martyn Hobbs, Julia Starr Keddle.- Oxford English for Careers Oxford University Press, 2011.- 135 с.

3. *Economics for Everyone: учеб. пособие / под общ. ред. Н. А. Николаевой ;* М-во образования и науки РФ, Урал. гос. экон. ун-т. – Екатеринбург : Изд-во УрГЭУ, 2015. -257 с.

4. Studio Cambridge. Summer Camp for learners aged 9-19 [Электронный ресурс]: Studio Language Courses Ltd, Cambridge, 2013 – Режим доступа: <https://www.studiocambridge.co.uk/summer-camps/> (дата обращения 18.04.2018).