

## **ПРАКТИЧЕСКАЯ РИТОРИКА: ТИПИЧНЫЕ ЗАБЛУЖДЕНИЯ**

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*Аннотация.* В статье рассматриваются некоторые факторы, затрудняющие процесс преподавания риторики как практической языковой дисциплины в специализированном вузе, связанные с неверными изначальными установками и представлениями обучающихся о предмете, о его целях и задачах, а также о сумме компетенций, подлежащих формированию и совершенствованию в рамках курса в контексте развития лингвистической компетентности обучающихся. На основе многолетнего опыта преподавания дисциплины «Практическая риторика» в качестве специализации студентам ФАЯ МГЛУ 3-его года обучения предлагается возможный путь преодоления вышеуказанных проблем при помощи анкетирования, имеющего целью как выяснение ожиданий студентов от курса и степени развития у них некоторых необходимых навыков и умений, так и информирование их о предстоящих задачах, а также приводится анкета, специально разработанная авторами в этих целях.

*Ключевые слова:* практическая риторика, аргумент, ожидания, заблуждения, анкета.

## **TYPICAL MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING RHETORIC**

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*Annotation.* The article dwells on certain factors hampering the process of teaching Practical Rhetoric as a speech practice discipline at a specialized university, related to students' incorrect initial attitudes and ideas about the subject's goals and tasks and the linguistic competencies to be formed and improved in the framework of the course. Basing on their many years' experience of teaching Practical Rhetoric as a specialization to 3rd year students of the English Department, MSLU, the authors offer a possible way to deal with the above-stated problems via a Start-of-the-Year questionnaire aimed at ascertaining students' expectations of the course and level of the necessary skills and abilities, as well as informing them of the forthcoming tasks, and suggest the questionnaire specially compiled for this purpose.

*Keywords:* Practical Rhetoric, argument, expectations, misconceptions, questionnaire.

Rhetoric as a practical foreign language discipline is aimed at shaping students' linguistic competences as integral elements of their professional competency and

requires a specific methodological approach considering its experimental and heuristic nature. The experience of teaching the course of Practical Rhetoric to 3<sup>rd</sup> year students of the English Department, MSLU, has shown that certain popular misconceptions about rhetoric as a field of knowledge might be a factor hampering the students' progress and the teachers' work.

At the beginning of the course of Practical Rhetoric, students expect to be provided with some explanations concerning the requirements and contents of the course, as well as its aims and objectives. When people come across the word *rhetoric*, a bunch of associations immediately spring up in their heads. To avoid false expectations and further disappointment, we would like to consider the main misconceptions about rhetoric and argumentation that our students used to share before the beginning of the course.

A basic misconception has its origin in the widely spread definition of rhetoric which says: "Rhetoric is an art of speaking". This is a good and relevant definition, but it sounds a bit misleading for those who rise to the challenge and aim at developing their rhetorical skills, as this definition focuses on the idealistic result and narrows rhetoric to the idea of speaking.

For some learners, it may come as a complete surprise that our course mainly puts forward the development of writing skills and considers reading as a basic rhetorical process. It does not mean that we exclude speaking from rhetorical context. It only means that we make emphasis on the painful and tiresome preparation effort rather than the demonstration of impressive and extraordinary result. It is as if you were looking at a masterpiece and saw not just a wonderful painting, but years of the artist's training, suffering, self-reflection and meditation that led to the creation of a modest small framed canvas.

The most brilliant historical public speeches were not a spontaneous stream of consciousness. They were thoroughly prepared, every subtlety, every word and gesture were paid attention to, not mentioning the fact that it took time and effort to learn them by heart and to repeat them dozens of times in front of friends, professional trainers and a mirror. What we are trying to say is that before we pronounce an argument, we first generate it, formulate it in our mind and then we write it down to make sure that it has the right structure and logic.

Therefore, a major false expectation we would like to avoid is that learning rhetoric goes around discussions and easy talking. Our students have to be prepared to do a lot of writing and make sure that they have enough paper to spend on drafts and sketches.

Another misconception comes from the association of rhetoric with eloquence. Again, the association itself is completely relevant. However, eloquence is not the

subject when it comes to teaching and learning rhetoric. People often expect that they take a book in rhetoric, do the exercises and all of a sudden eloquence will strike them like a bolt of lightning. Anyone expecting this kind of immediate result had better travel to Blarney Castle in Ireland and kiss the Blarney Stone, which, according to the legend, will grant them the gift of eloquence immediately. But if one doesn't believe in legends, they can't expect eloquence to be taught and explained to them.

Manuals and books provide strategies, recommendations and exercises, practical directions and rules. In short, they just explain how to structure speech or a piece of writing, to make it more logical or expressive. Nevertheless, none of the books will explain to the learner what to say to sound eloquent. In other words, there is a huge difference between "how to say" and "what to say". We may teach the student how to say something, but if they have nothing to say, this is their own failure. A course in rhetoric is supposed to provide learners with tools of formulating ideas, but not with thoughts and opinions. Thoughts should belong to the learner, who should be prepared to generate their own ideas and not mix up rhetoric with propaganda.

And finally, associating rhetoric with persuasion and truth seeking may become one more disappointment. This might have been very true in the times of Socrates and the Sophists, but the matter is that the modern world is pluralistic and multicultural, with our assumptions and beliefs routed into different cultures, thus creating multiple visions of truth and making universal truth seeking impossible and irrelevant. Interestingly, winning the argument is not always the aim today. In the modern context, we rather ponder on the optimal solution to an issue while analyzing all obtainable evidence, respectfully considering the views of all participants, explaining and attempting to defend our own values, beliefs, and principles, and assuming responsibility for our point of view. Consequently, it often means acknowledging the pressure of alternative views, and being willing to change one's mind. Therefore, we focus on the development of critical thinking and the ability to support one's own ideas logically and clearly more than on the straightforward desire to prove something to somebody. Our students should be prepared to broaden their own assumptions and to acknowledge alternative views, because rhetoric is very often more about changing one's own mind first rather than changing others' minds.

In order to sort out students' possible false expectations of the discipline as soon as possible, we ask them to fill in a Start-of-the-Course Questionnaire during the opening class before we actually supply them with the Course Map and the Course Outline. The questionnaire was compiled to meet the above-mentioned

challenge and has proven of great help in guiding the students towards the course's tools, aims, and objectives as well as in finding out invaluable information about their abilities and preferable learning styles. An analysis of the responses facilitates the task of organizing effective in-class activities and fruitful independent work.

## **PRACTICAL RHETORIC**

### **Start-of-the-Course Questionnaire**

**1. First name:**

**Surname:Group:**

**2. I am at this university because (you can mark more than one)**

- I have always enjoyed the process of language learning
- I want to resemble my teacher who was an inspiration
- The university is prestigious
- I'll need skills in certain subjects taught here for my job
- It was my parents' (someone else's) influence
- I just need a document to confirm higher education
- I am not that interested in humanities, but things are much worse with

other subjects (maths, etc)

- Other reasons (please, mention)

**3. I am more likely to memorize information if (you can mark more than one)**

- I see it written
- I can make notes
- It is repeated to me, I hear it
- I am retelling it to someone else
- I imagine in detail the process it describes
- I create associations with other spheres of knowledge

- Other techniques (describe them)

**4. What to your mind contributes most to effective learning process (you can mark more than one)?**

- Teacher's skills and personality
- Student's wish and determination to master skills
- Inborn abilities
- Professional incentive: perspectives of promotion, pay rise, a trip abroad, etc.

- Good ability to manage one's time
- Good learning conditions (please, specify)
- Control: marks, exams, credits, deadlines, etc.
- Something else (say what)

**5. How many books a year do you read? (on your own, not something you have to read)**

**6. What is your favorite reading? (please, underline)**

Romance; detective stories; science fiction; fantasy; historical fiction; psychological fiction; philosophical novels; poetry; popular self-help books; popular magazines; newspapers; other (please, mention)

**7. Have you ever**

- kept a diary,
- taken part in debates,
- contributed to newspapers or magazines,
- kept a blog,
- commented in social networks, news blogs, forums, etc.,
- held public speeches,
- tried to write prose,
- tried to write poetry,

- enjoyed writing long letters,
- practiced any other form of creative writing?

**8. Why did you choose rhetoric as your 3rd year specialization? Was it your choice or just chance?**

**9. Brainstorm the notion of rhetoric and put down your first 5 immediate associations (words or word combinations)**

**10. What is rhetoric, in your opinion?**

**11. What are your expectations from the course?**

**12. Which language skills and competencies do you expect to improve?**

- Critical thinking
- Verbal reasoning
- Questioning skills and techniques
- Clarity in expressing thoughts and emotions
- Debate and discussion
- Listening skills and reflection
- Other (please, mention)

**13.**

**Mark three from**

**below as the most essential ways to develop rhetoric competences**

- Reading fiction
- Reading periodicals and documentaries
- Writing essays
- Boosting up spoken language skills (pronunciation, presentation, non-verbal behaviour)
- Improving grammar
- Studying stylistics
- Developing critical thinking
- Learning psychology

- Broadening thesaurus (general background knowledge)
- Something else (say what)

**14. How much time does it take you to write an A-4 page-long text?**

**15. How many pages long was the longest text you ever had to write?**

**How much time did it take you to write?**

**16. Is it much of a problem for you to prepare and deliver a public speech / presentation, etc. independently?**

**17. And in a team (putting forward ideas / organizing team work / gathering and selecting information / as a presenter / tech support / other – please, underline or specify)?**

**18. What type of speaker are you?**

In one-to-ones	In small groups	In formal presentations
keen	keen	keen
eager	eager	eager
shy	shy	shy
reluctant	reluctant	reluctant
confident	confident	confident
enthusiastic	enthusiastic	enthusiastic
authoritarian /	authoritarian /	authoritarian /
categorical	categorical	categorical
open to dialogue	open to dialogue	open to dialogue
<i>other</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>other</i>

**19. Which format would you prefer to prepare and deliver a public speech / presentation, etc.?**

- Oral
- Oral with a flip-chart
- Oral with visual aids (pictures, diagrams, illustrations)

- Video
- Slide show / Power Point
- Other (please, mention)

**20. Out of classroom, in which spheres do you think rhetoric skills might be needed professionally or non-professionally?**

Now, knowing what Practical Rhetoric is *not*, it is time to see what rhetoric is (or may be) as a practical language discipline. There is no easy definition of rhetoric, but we can start with the general statement that it is a discovery of available arguments in a particular context. Thus, we place argument in the center of rhetorical context. The notion of context is important because any argumentation will be relevant only under particular circumstances. As all two-parent children know, what works with one parent, does not work with the other.

So, what is argument as the central term of our attention? This is neither debate, nor quarrel. Argument doesn't necessarily imply angry shouting or political disputes. In our understanding, this is an original creative process of discussion which presupposes critical thinking, analysis and research.

Also, argument is a product. These products range in forms and formats from short turns in an informal discussion to a carefully prepared formal speech under more formal settings. The product might be orally delivered or submitted as a written academic paper. Anyway, the product enters the process, and the goal of the orator / writer and the audience is to find the best solution to the problem under discussion. In our course, we aim at examining the nature and peculiarities of effective arguments that will allow our learners to produce justified reasons and convincing evidence to support their position successfully.

There is no shortcut to becoming an eloquent and successful speaker. But if our students are ready to sweat a bit, to do piles of reading and writing, to make their brains work towards generating ideas of their own and to be flexible enough when it comes to changing their mind, then we have a self-flattering belief that we may be of some help to them. We will not help our learners to excel in oratory eloquence or find universal truth, but if they follow the instructions, they can expect to enhance their powers in critical thinking, structuring their ideas logically and coherently, backing up values reasonably without getting involved into nasty quarrel and name-calling, and expressing facts and emotions adequately in writing and speaking.