

Implementing an Oral Communication Unit for IT Specialists: Research & Practices

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Abstract

This applied research report presents a unit for an oral communication course for IT specialists to improve their speaking, listening, and pronunciation through activities that are adapted from the IT work environment. First, the paper presents a background about the intended students and curriculum. Next, it presents three lessons' objectives with three lessons plans. It also contains a sample of a conversational text that will be used, and it analyzes the text suprasegmentally. In addition, it discusses the activities in the three lessons plans and links them to language learning and teaching research. Moreover, it shows how Nation and Newton's (2009) four strands are balanced throughout the unit's activities. Finally, it discusses the potential caveats with the unit.

Introduction & Background

A. General Purpose of the Paper:

The information technology (IT) has developed significantly in the past few years which has increased the demand for the professional IT specialists. One of the most required skills that IT specialists should have is good oral communication skills (Maes, Icenogle, & Weldy, 1997). In the workplace, high oral communication skills facilitate work obstacles that are created by misunderstanding due to unclear pronunciation, inability to engage in short or long conversations, or inability to present ideas and suggestions (Kassim, & Ali, 2010). Moreover, one of the basic requirements to get the IT job is having good oral communication skills. Kaur and Hua (2006) state that IT specialists “can enhance their job performance and chances of employability if they possess effective oral communication ability” (pra. 3).

To illustrate, people who have a strong foreign accent in the L2 country might be at a professional or social disadvantage (Neri, Cucchiarini, Strik, and Boves, 2002). Oral communication requires that both interlocutors in the conversation to have high listening skills, effective speaking skills, and clear pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & with Griner, 2010). This paper presents a unit for an oral communication course for IT specialists to improve their speaking, listening, and pronunciation through activities that are adapted from the IT work environment based on language learning and teaching research.

B. Setting.

The unit is designed for ESOL students and non English native speakers who are already working in the IT sector, and they want to extend their oral communication skills within the context of IT. The proficiency level of intended audience is upper intermediate. The culture does not play important role in the unit since ESP materials usually does not concern about the culture (Barron, 1991). The unit can be taught to students who are from different countries or culture backgrounds.

Curriculum

A. Curricular emphasis of the program

The curricular emphasis of the program is in English for specific purposes (ESP) context. The unit can be taught in a program that is designed for the students who will study technology and computing as a prerequisite course at the university level. Some universities require from its non-native English speakers to have high oral communication skills in order to be admitted to their colleges. So, IT students need to attend a language program to develop their language skills especially the oral communication skills. The unit can be used as an effective material in that program. It also can be taught in technological companies that provide an oral communication course for its non-native English employees in order to improve their oral communication skills at the workplace.

B. Goals for the course and unit within the curriculum.

1. To improve the students’ general ability to speak English more clearly and accurately in the IT context.
2. To improve the students’ English listening skills in the IT context.
3. To develop the students’ pronunciation skills through activities that concentrate on the suprasegmentals element of pronunciation.
4. To train the students to do activities which are most used in the IT work environment.
5. To introduce students to the IT world through topics which are related to IT environment.

6. To provide the students with the most used vocabulary in the IT context.

The Unit

A. Unit Location and Theme:

This unit comes at the middle of the course. It can be the unit six in a ten-unit course. In the first five units, the students have been introduced to the English segmental elements of pronunciation. They also have taken some speaking strategies that are required in the IT field, such as exchange information and asking for clarification. In addition, they have listened to different types of conversations and dialogues that are adapted from the IT work environment, such as a job interview and a conversation with IT consultant.

However, the unit can be taught alone. It does not depend on the previous units or the upcoming units. The teacher can assess his students' performance at the end of the unit. For instance, the teacher can take this unit to teach it to the students who want to know how to identify and stress the prominent words in long and short sentences. It can be also an effective material to be used to teach a dialogue and monologue in the IT field. Moreover, the teacher can use it to increase his students' ability to listen to different types of input to familiarize them with the spoken language in the IT environment. For example, the unit introduces the students to the short conversation in a computer repair shop, the long conversation in the computer school, and the short presentation about an IT topic. Each lesson in the unit contains three main parts: listening, speaking, and pronunciation. Murphy (1991), stresses that the oral communication course should contains listening, speaking, and pronunciation in order to be considered as an effective oral communication course.

B. Objectives

Lesson one objectives:

1. Students will be able to understand a short conversation in an IT context.
2. Students will be able to converse in a short conversation in an IT context.
3. Students will be able to identify stressed words in a short sentence.
4. Students will increase their IT terms that are used in repair shops.

Lesson two objectives:

1. Students will be able to understand a long conversation in an IT context.
2. Students will be able to converse in a long conversation in an IT context.
3. Students will be able to identify stressed words in a long sentence.

Lesson three objectives:

1. Students will be able to understand a short presentation about a topic in an IT context.
2. Students will be able to do a short presentation about an IT school, institute, or company.
3. Students will be able to identify stressed words in short sentences and long sentences.
4. Students will expand their knowledge about IT organizations, schools, and companies.

For more information, see appendix I: lesson plans and appendix II: A sample of the text to be used.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Part 1: Lesson Plan One:

In the first lesson plan, the activities have been chosen carefully to reach the objectives of the lesson. The first activity activates the students' schema by asking students questions that are related to their personal life to utilize their prior knowledge about fixing computer in computer repair shops. According to King-Friedrichs, (2001), Rumelhart, (1997), and Dunkel, (1986), activating schema helps language students to understand the lesson since it utilizes their prior knowledge and motivate them to do the lesson's activities. The second activity contains difficult words that will be used in the listening part. Teaching vocabulary before the learning task is an effective strategy that can help students to understand the learning task (Flowerdew, & Miller, 2005 & Cohen, 2008).

In the third activity, the students will listen to a short conversation once. At the first time, the students will listen to have the main idea. Then, they will listen to the conversation again for more details. Lynch, (2009) states that in order to teach listening effectively, the students should listen to the conversation again for more details. In the fourth activity, the students will answer comprehension questions about the conversation. Mendelsohn, (1994) stresses that language learning activities should follow the listening task to ensure that the students understand the listening task. See Appendix D

In the following activity, the students will compare and discuss their answers with their classmates. Richards, (2005) writes that a good listening lesson format involves checking and discussing the answers. Based on the listening task, the speaking activity will follow. In the speaking activity, the students will do short conversations. They will play similar roles to that in the conversation. Role play is a useful technique to develop students' ability to speak and engage in an oral communication (Kodotchigova, 2002., Ments, 1999, & Folse, 2006). In the last two activities, the teacher will teach pronunciation rules since they are very important in oral communication course (Jenkins, 2002). He will explain stressed words in short conversations. According to Dauer (2005) and Celce-Murcia, et al (2010), teaching stressed words is an

important part of pronunciation that language students should acquire. Finally, the students will do activities to practice using these rules to identify stressed words in short sentences. **For more information, See Appendix A**

Part 2. Lesson Plan Two:

In the first activity, the teacher will set the purpose for the listening task. According to Ur (1984), this technique helps language students to concentrate more since they have attended goals to be achieved at the end of the listening task. It also reduces the burden of listening to a long conversation (Vandergrift, 2002). In the second lesson, the students will listen to a long conversation since listening to different types of conversations increases students' listening skills and introduces them to different outputs (Mendelsohn 1994). In the second activity, the teacher will play the conversation again. Graham and Macaro (2008) and Celce-Murcia, et al (2010) stress that listening to a conversation more than once helps the students to understand the conversation and to improve their listening skills. Next, there will be activities about the listening to strengthen the students' listening comprehension.

In the fourth activity, the students will compare their answers with their partners. Zha, Kelly, Park, & Fitzgerald, (2006) stress that the peer's discussion enhances the students' oral communication and encourages them to speak. In the following activity, the students will create conversations similar to the conversation in the listening task. Lam, (2007) states that when the students have ideas about the conversation topic, they are able to participate more in the conversation. In the sixth activity, the teacher will explain the stressed words in long sentences. After that, the teacher will give the students the transcript of the long conversation in the listening task, and ask them to identify the stressed words based on the rules he has explained. In conclusion, the teacher will ask the students if they have any difficult questions, and he will give them the homework that is based on the class activities. See Appendix B

Part 3. Lesson Plan Three:

In the third lesson, the teacher will start the lesson by using prediction as pre listening strategy to prepare the students for the listening task. According to McDonough and Shaw, (2003) prediction helps language students to create clues that enable them to understand the meaning of the learning task. In the second activity, the teacher will play the presentation two times. Carduner and Riling (2009) state that listening and doing presentation improve students' oral communication skills and familiarize them with educational environment. As in the previous two lessons, the comprehensible listening precedes the oral production in third lesson. Dunkel (1986) stresses that in the effective language materials; the listening comes before the oral production. In order to be more helpful unit, this lesson plan will be monologue. Celce-Murcia, et al (2010), Folse, (2006), and Mendelsohn, (1994), say that language materials should contain monologue and dialogue so that students can practice the tow types of output.

In the next activity, the teacher will set a small workshop to prepare the students for their short presentations. In this workshop, he will write some rules about conducting an effective presentation. Luoma (2004) states when students have preparation before their presentation, they present their topic in clear and comprehensible way. The teacher will also give the students the criteria that he will assess them based on before they do their presentation. Folse, (2006) stresses that the assessment of a skill should be done in the way it is taught in order to provide accurate results of the students' proficiency level. In the last lesson, more focus will be on speaking since that "speaking is the most highly valued skill" for foreign language learners (Stewart, 2009. P.2). At the end of the lesson, the teacher will give students their next homework. The homework will be based on the class activities in order to assess the students' understanding of class activities.

Benjamin (2008), states that homework is an effective way for assessing students' performance. See Appendix C.

Part 4: Balance: Nation and Newton's (2009) four strands

In this unit, the four strands (Nation and Newton, 2009) are balanced well throughout the unit's activities. Each lesson contains at least excellent category in all of the four strands. To illustrate, in each lesson, there is a lot of input that will be interesting, understandable, and familiar to the students. There is also a lot of production that will be familiar to the students and understandable through communication activities and strategies. It encourages them to communicate too. In addition, each lesson includes the language-focused learning strand through activities that is focus on a specific form in-depth. The activities are also build on previous knowledge and repeated to enable students to practice more. Regarding the last strand, there is one activity that meets the all conditions of this strand in each lesson. In this activity, there are lots of inputs and outputs that are familiar to the students and motivate them to learn. It also depends on receiving and sending messages.

The following chart illustrates the four strands in the unit.

The Activity	Input	Output	Language Focus	Fluency
Lesson Plan One				
1- Activity		Excellent		
2- Activity			Good	
3- Activity	Good			
4- Activity	Excellent			
5- Activity				Excellent
6- Activity		Excellent		
7- Activity	Good			
8- Activity			Excellent	
Lesson Plan Two				
1- Activity	Good			
2- Activity	Good			
3- Activity	Excellent			
4- Activity				Excellent
5- Activity		Excellent		
6- Activity			Good	
7- Activity			Excellent	
Lesson Plan Three				
1- Activity		Excellent		
2- Activity	Good			
3- Activity	Excellent			
4- Activity				Excellent
5- Activity			Excellent	
6- Activity		Excellent		

Language Analysis

In the conversation, the two speakers are have natural mood that is why their pitches most of the time are medium. The speakers use medium pitch because they do not know each other before, and the situation requires that both of them to be careful in order not to be

misunderstood. For example, if the costumer uses high pitch with the technician, the technician might feel disrespected. Moreover, if he uses low pitch, the technician might not be able to hear him clearly. The two speakers do not reveal their emotions whether they are happy or sad because they meet for the first time, and they do not have background information about the personality or the situation of the interlocutors.

In the analysis of the text, in order to pronounce the sentences easily, they are divided into tone groups (Celce-Murcia, et al., 2010). These tone groups contains maximum seven syllables. Sethi, (2004) states that tone group can be a clause, phrase, or one word. Tone group is usually marked by a pause in speech. The stressed words are identified based on the following rules. Flowerdew and Miller (2005) clarify, “words that carry stress are usually content words, while distressed words will normally be grammatical or functional words” (p. 32). The content words are like the nouns, the main verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that have significant meaning in the sentences (Baker, & Goldstein, 2008, & Celce-Murcia, et al 2010). The intonations are identified based on the following rules. Flat dip intonation is used with comma since comma indicates that sentence has not finished yet (Lamb & Webster 2004). Tone group should be not more than seven syllables so the students can be able to pronounce it, the stressed words are usually on the right, period has down basic intonation, comma has flat dip intonation, flat basic intonation is used when there is a stop in the middle of the sentence because there are more than seven syllables in the sentence, and down Jump intonation is used with exclamation mark. See Appendix E

Caveats & Conclusions

As any language material, the unit contains some minor caveats. These caveats do not prevent the unit to be taught in ESP program as a very useful material for IT students who want to improve their oral communication skills. For example, the unit is not self-study material. The teacher plays important roles throughout the unit. So, the unit is not recommended for the students who buy books and study at home. The unit also requires that the students have especial equipments in order to do the homework activities and send them to the teacher, such as the cassette recorder. However, the language students can overcome this by borrowing the devices from their classmates or using the school library educational devices. The last caveat is that the unit does not contain any explanations of grammatical forms. However, Folse (2006) confirms that grammar is not as important as pronunciation and meaning of vocabulary in communication course. This problem can be overcome by taking grammar courses where they will be taught several grammar rules explicitly.

In conclusion, the unit helps the students to improve their oral communication skills through activities that are similar to what the students will counter in the IT field. These activities also familiarize the students with the IT world and increase their IT terms and expressions. Each lesson contains speaking, listening, and pronunciation, and the activities within the lesson are build on each other in order to build the students’ oral communication skills significantly. Although, the unit contains minor potential caveats, theses caveats can not prevent the unit to be considered as an effective language material for an oral communication course for IT students based on the language learning and teaching research.

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Appendix: A**Lesson Plan#1****Unit:** 6**Lesson:** One**Topic:** In the Computer Repair Shop.**Lesson Focus:**

- A- Engaging in short conversations in Information Technology context.
- B- Identifying stressed words in short conversation.

Learning Expectations/Objectives:

1. Students will be able to listen and understand short daily conversations in the computer repair shop.
2. Students will be able to speak and communicate with costumers in the computer repair shop clearly.
3. Students will be able to identify stressed words in short sentences.

Time: 90 minutes.**Materials and equipments:**

Pictures of computer repair shops

Cassette recorders or CD players

Lesson Flow	Time
1. Teacher will start the lesson by activating students' schema in order to prepare them to the lesson. He will ask them questions that are related to their prior knowledge about repairing computer in computer repair shop. He will show the students pictures of computer repair shops, and he will ask them about their experiences and stories in computer repair shops.	10
2. The students will do vocabulary exercise. Students will match the words with their meanings individually. Then, the teacher will ask students about the words meanings in order to make sure that they do the exercise correctly. The words in the vocabulary exercise are taken from the conversation in the listening part so that the difficult words or terms will not prevent students to understand the conversation.	10 5 10
3. The teacher will play the conversation. Students will listen to the conversation and try to understand the main idea of the conversation.	10 15
4. The teacher will play the conversation again and ask the students to answer the comprehension questions that follow the conversations.	
5. Students will compare and discuss their answers with their classmates	15
6. The teacher will divide the students into pairs. One student will play the role of the technician in the computer repair shop and the other student will play the role of the costumer. Then, they will shift the roles so the student who is the costumer will be the technician in the computer repair shop.	10 5
7. Teacher will write short sentences on the board and explain where the stressed words in these short sentences. The teacher will write some rules that help students to identify the stressed words in short sentences.	
8. The teacher will give the students a transcript of the conversation and he will play the conversation again. The students will identify the stressed words in conversation	

- | | |
|---|--|
| 9. Closure: teacher will ask the students if they have any questions. He also will give them the homework for the next class. | |
|---|--|

Evaluation: Students will be evaluated based on their

- Participation of speaking activities
- Answers of listening activities
- Homework exercises

Homework/ Follow-up: Each two of them will create a short conversation similar to that in the computer repair shop. They will record themselves and they will send it to the teacher. One of them will play the role of a technician and the other will play the role of a customer. They also will transcribe the short conversation and identify the stressed words only.

Appendix: B**Lesson Plan#2****Unit: 6****Lesson Two****Topic:** In the School of Computer Science**Lesson Focus:**

Engaging in long conversations in Information Technology context.

Identifying stressed words in long conversation.

Learning Expectations/Objectives:

Students will be able to listen and understand a long conversation with computer instructors in a computer science school or graduate students in a computer college

Students will be able to speak and communicate with instructors in the computer college in a long conversation

Students will be able to identify stressed words in long sentences

Time: 90 minutes.**Materials and equipments:**

Cassette recorders or CD players

Lesson Flow	Time
1. Warm up Activity: Setting a purpose for listening. Teacher will write questions about the conversation that students are going to listen. He also will write words that will be in the conversation. He will ask students to listen to the conversation and answer the questions and understand the meaning of the words	10
2. The teacher will play the conversation. Students will listen to the conversation and try to understand the main idea of the conversation.	8
3. The teacher will play the conversation again and ask the students to answer the comprehension questions that follow the conversations.	14
4. Students will compare and discuss their answers with their classmates	8
5. The teacher will divide the students into pairs. One student will play the role of the instructor in the computer college and the other student will play the role of the student. Then, they will shift the roles so the student who has played the instructor role will be the role of student	20
6. Teacher will write long sentences on the board and explain where the stressed words in these long sentences. The teacher will write some rules that help students to identify the stressed words in long sentences.	15
7. The teacher will give the students a transcript of the conversation and he will play the conversation again. The students will identify the stressed words in conversation	10
8. Closure: teacher will ask the students if they have any questions. He also will give them the homework for the next class.	5

Evaluation: students will be evaluated based on their

- Answers to listening exercises
- Participation in speaking activities
- Homework exercises

Homework/ Follow-up: Each two of them create a long conversation similar to that in the computer college. They will record themselves, and they will send it to the teacher. One of them will play the role of instructor and the other will play the role of student. They also will transcribe the long conversation and identify the stressed words only.

Appendix: C**Unit:** 6**Lesson Plan#3****Lesson:** Three**Topic:** Indian institutes of Technology (IIT)**Lesson Focus:**

Doing short presentations about IT related topics

Learning Expectations/Objectives:

Students will be able to listen and understand a short presentation about Indian Institute of Technology Students will be able to give short presentation about computer school or computer course

Students will be able to identify stressed words in short presentation

Time: 90 minutes.**Materials and equipments:**

Pictures of Indian Institute of Technology

Cassette recorders or CD players

Lesson Flow	Time
1. Warm up Activity: The students will be asked to guess what the kind of information will be given in the presentation. They teacher will write on the board the elicit information from the students about the Indian Institute of technology	10 6
2. The teacher will play the short presentation. Students will listen to the presentation and they will try to understand the main idea of the conversation.	14
3. The teacher will play the short presentation again and ask the students to answer the comprehension questions that follow the presentation.	10 15
4. Students will compare and discuss their answers with their classmates	
5. Teacher will give the students the transcript of the short presentation and the teacher and they students will try to identify and discuss the stressed words and why they have been stressed based on the rules they have learned in lesson one and two.	30
6. The teacher will set workshop for doing short presentation. Each student will do short presentation approximately between 3-5 minutes about a computer college or a technological institute as homework assignment individually. The teacher will divide them into groups, and each group will do short presentation about computer college, course, or institute. The other groups will watch and write notes, comments, or observations about the presentation. After that they will discuss these notes and observations.	5
7. Closure: teacher will ask the students if they have any questions. He also will give them the homework for the next class.	

Evaluation: students will be evaluated based on their

- Answers to listening exercises
- Participation in speaking activities
- Homework exercises

Homework/ Follow-up: Each student will give short presentation similar to that in the classroom activities. Students will record themselves, and they will send the record to the teacher.

Appendix: D

The computer technician: Good afternoon, sir. How may I help you?

The customer: Good afternoon, my laptop operating system is very slow.

The computer technician: Which operating system do you have?

The customer: I have installed windows Visa.

The computer technician: Let me check. There are several reasons why the operating system is very slow.

The customer: Can you tell me what they are?

The computer technician: Yes. For example, there is no enough RAM, temporary files have built up on your hard disk, your computer has been infected, or you might need to update your operating system.

The customer: It is a new computer; I bought it five months ago.

The computer technician: Do you delete temporary files?

The customer: No, I do not.

The Computer technician: I see, the temporary files cause your laptop to slow down, I will delete them.

The customer: Ok, how much does it cost?

The computer technician: It is free for new customers.

The customer: Awesome!

Appendix: E

Mood: natural

Setting: In Computer Repair Shop.

The computer technician: (M- FD) **Good** afternoon/, (L-DB) **sir**/. (M-UB) How may I **help** you? /

The customer: (M- FD) **Good** afternoon, / (M-FB) my **laptop**/ (M-FB) operating **system**/ (M-DB) is very **slow**./

The computer technician: (M-DB) which operating **system**/ (M- DB) do you **have**? /

The customer: (M- FB) I have **installed**/ (M- DB) windows **Vista**. /

The computer technician: (M-DB) Let me **check**. / (M- FB) There are several **reasons**/ (M-FB) why the operating **system**/ (M-DB) is very **slow**. /

The customer: (M-UB) Can you **tell** me what are **they**? /

The computer technician: (M-FD) **Yes**./ (M-FD) for **example**./ (M-FD) there is no enough **RAM**./ (M-FB) temporary **files** have/ (M-FD) built up on your hard **disk**./ (M-FB) your **computer**/ (M-FD) has been **infected**./ (M-FB) or you might need to **update**/ (M- DB) your operating **system**.

The customer: (L- DB) It is a **new** computer. / (M-FB) I bought it **five** months **ago**./

The computer technician: (M- FB) Do you **delete**/ (M- UB) temporary **files**? /

The customer: (M- DB) No, I do **not**. /

The Computer technician: (M-DB) I **see** ./ (M-FB) the temporary **files**/ (M-DB) cause your laptop to slow **down**./ (M-DB) I will **delete** them./

The customer: (M-FD) **ok**, / (M-DB) how much does it **cost**? /

The computer technician: (M-FB) it is **free**/ (M-DB) for **new** customers. /

The customer: (M-DJ) **Awesome**! /