Notes for Unit 4

As pointed out in the introduction to unit 4, defining concepts is an important academic activity. In their final speech, students give an extended definition of a term from their field of studies. Discussing definitions with colleagues is often different from presenting a definition speech to a general academic audience. In the latter case speakers need to (1) choose a topic that is appealing to a general academic audience and (2) develop their speech in a way that a general academic audience can follow it.

The topic of task 1 was chosen in part because it defines a word (battery) that most people generally associate with a device that generates current, such as a car battery. In addition, the speaker chooses a somewhat instructional style, relying on a number of strategies to develop and maintain a relationship with the audience.

One drawback to this speech is that students sometimes attempt to imitate the speaker’s approach, which may not work well for their own speech topic. When preparing their speeches, speakers should be encouraged to consider how the concept they are going to discuss lends itself to certain types of organization and audience considerations.

If time permits, Definition of a Battery should be read aloud in pairs or small groups and questions discussed by the members of the group. If time is short, the instructor can guide a large group discussion. Adequate time should be spent on question 6 and the summary of ways the speaker maintains a relationship with the audience on p. 92.

The transparency that accompanies the Definition of a Battery speech contains a simple outline of the speech. The speaker, using a piece of paper, can cover up the parts of the outline she doesn’t wish to reveal. This prevents the audience from reading ahead. It is important to point out to students that an outline helps the speaker remember what points s/he needs to discuss. It also facilitates audience comprehension. Moreover, the audience can refer to the outline when asking questions. Speakers who have trouble remembering what they are going to say may wish to use a more detailed outline. However, too much writing may detract the audience’s attention from the speaker.

Task 2, Fillers, is a short activity using examples of common fillers from the Definition of a Battery speech. It is not uncommon to hear fillers in academic presentations. In fact, more spontaneous speakers may use a number of fillers.
One problem that some speakers face, however, is that they may overuse fillers if they are not well prepared or are not as fluent as other class members. This can interfere with the smooth flow of their presentation. One specific problem that weaker speakers have is that they say several words correctly and then repeat them. These speakers can be encouraged to avoid these repetitions by practicing more and using pauses or fillers like um and uh while they think of what they are going to say next. In this section, which was written with a nonlinguistic audience in mind, fillers are defined broadly. The goal is to encourage students to observe and evaluate their own use of fillers. Instructors who want to spend more time on fillers may wish to refer to the MICASE website for scripts of academic presentations and lectures. The class may be interested in discussing cultural differences in the use of fillers, such as the use of so or breathing in through the teeth, and how these fillers, when used in English, may interfere with audience comprehension. (Also see activity 1 under Additional Activities below.)

One of the most important sections in the unit is Developing or Extending a Definition. In this section, students are given a list of ways to extend a definition, Types of Information in an Extended Definition. In task 3 they discuss in small groups how they would extend some of the terms in the list. In Organizing extended definitions, task 4, students choose organizational strategies that can be used to arrange certain types of information. Students should be familiar with the organizational strategies listed in the exercise; however, instructors may wish to review them before students complete the exercise. This task can be done quickly.

Under Opening a Definition Speech, task 5 focuses on speech openers. In this enjoyable activity students discuss how the speakers in introductions 1–4 opened their speeches and where they introduced their definitions. It is especially useful for novice speakers who resort to Today I’d like to talk about as a means of opening their speeches. In the four examples, speakers ease themselves into the topic. Openers place the word in a context and thus make it easier for the audience to follow. They can also create rapport with the audience. Instructors should feel free to substitute for these openers others more related to their students’ area of studies.

Strategies for opening your speech lists examples of common openers in English. More can be added. Task 6 gives students hands-on practice designing an attention-getting opening for a term and choosing an organizational strategy. This exercise can be omitted or modified if time is short. Speakers can also bring in the term that they plan to define in their final presentation, write an opening for it, and discuss how they would expand it. Or, students can choose a term from the list on page 94.

Formal Definitions reviews the structure of a three-part definition. In task 7 students are asked to quickly underline the three parts of each of the definitions provided. Instructors may wish to provide their own list, especially if the students in their class are all in one field of study. At the end of task 7, there are some useful notes on three-part definitions that are worth discussing.
Task 8, Other Ways to Define a Term, provides students with common options to three-part definitions. It should be stressed that in their final presentation, speakers should give a one-sentence definition of their term before expanding it, but that there are a number of acceptable ways to do this. In task 9 students discuss the different forms used in the speech openers in task 4 on page 95. This activity can be done quickly. (Also see activity 2 under Additional Activities below.)

Defining Additional Terms, a discussion on substitutions, is included in this unit but is useful in preparing any type of speech where the speaker needs to define terms at points during the presentation. After task 10, the instructor may also wish to provide more examples.

Using Transparencies with Outlines discusses the benefits of using a transparency with a speech outline. So far, speakers may have relied heavily on pictures rather than an outline. However, in this presentation some speakers will discuss more abstract terms and therefore will not be able to provide a picture. Students should be reminded to include a title since the audience may not immediately understand the topic of the presentation.

Task 11 is an example of an outline of a definition speech on polymers. The speaker extends the definition by stating the characteristics of polymers (listing), by discussing their structures (classification), and by naming common types of polymers (classification). He also gives examples of polymers (listing?). (Also see activity 3 under Additional Activities below.)

Task 12 presents students with a number of real examples of the use of the linking word Let me in academic lectures. Let me in all these cases is used by the speaker to tell the audience what s/he plans to do next. The last example, Let me answer your question in a minute, is a helpful expression for speakers who want to postpone answering a question posed by an audience member. (Also see unit 5, task 8, page 135.) It is helpful to mention the main difference between Let me and Let's, which is explained in the note.

Task 13 provides guidelines for the final presentation. Instructors are encouraged to modify these guidelines for their particular class.

Should you write out your speech? is introduced in this unit because some students have trouble developing definition speeches. Definition speeches can be more complex than previous speeches, especially if the speaker chooses a technical or abstract term. Choosing a topic for a general academic audience, designing an attractive opener, giving a concise one- or two-sentence definition, deciding what information to include, and organizing information are challenging tasks for novice presenters. If presenters write out their speeches, they may be able to get useful feedback from the instructor or other class members before making their presentation. (Also see activity 4 under Additional Activities below.)
**Interrupting the Speaker** provides some strategies from MICASE on interrupting the speaker and making suitable requests for information.

Evaluation sheets are provided in the unit.

**Supplementary Materials**

**Pronunciation: Intonation and Noun Phrases** discusses the use of high-level intonation to highlight two types of noun phrases: adjective (noun) + noun, and adjective + noun. Because no precise rules apply in all cases, general guidelines are given and some exceptions are discussed. Practice and a choice of tasks (tasks 14, 15, and 16) are provided.

The importance of gestures was touched on in unit 1. By the time students are ready to present their definition speech, they should generally be comfortable using gestures in front of an audience. For those instructors who feel additional work is needed, a section on **Gestures** is provided in the **Supplementary Materials**. In this section, students are asked to quickly evaluate their own hand gestures and suggest ways to improve them. Typical ways speakers use gestures are listed. (For a scholarly discussion of gesture classifications and additional references, see “Gesture as a Communication Strategy in Second Language Discourse,” *A Study of Learners of French and Swedish*, by Marianne Gullberg [Lund: Lund University Press, 1998].)

In **task 17** students think about various ways to use their hands to help them enhance the messages that are listed in the task. Students generally enjoy comparing different gesturing styles.

In **tasks 18 and 19**, students observe and evaluate their and others’ gestures more closely. Instructors are encouraged to include a discussion of cross-cultural differences that their students have noticed in class or in other academic settings.

Head movements are not discussed in the text. Instructors may wish to include various types of head movements in their discussion on gestures.

**Additional Activities**

1. Ask students to write down five sentences from the video or audio recording of their last speech. They should include all fillers, even those from their own language. Discuss these in class.

2. Give students a three-part definition and ask them to say the definition in several other ways, relying on **task 8** on page 98 to help them.

3. Bring a series of transparencies with outlines of definition speeches and ask students to discuss the organizational strategy (strategies) the speaker has chosen.
4. If students write out their speeches, ask them to read their speech aloud to their partner or group and get feedback before their final presentation. Or, the instructor can ask students to exchange transcripts over e-mail.

5. Play a video of a classroom lecture in which the professor defines a term. Discuss the lecture and the strategies that the professor used to introduce and expand the definition.

**Using the Unit with Future Teaching Assistants or Graduate Teaching Instructors**

The unit 4 speech *Definition of a Battery* relies heavily on good teaching strategies and should be highlighted. The expressions *let’s* and *let me* on page 102, definitions on pages 97–99 and further work on gestures on page 115 in the supplementary activities are all well worth discussing with TAs/GSIs.

After discussing the section on *Interrupting the Speaker* on page 104 and before final presentations, instructors may wish to assign interruption tasks to members of the audience. This exercise is helpful for TAs/GSIs who come from educational systems in which it is impolite or at least unusual for students to interrupt their instructor.

**Using the Unit with Native Speakers**

Making a definition speech can be challenging for native speakers. In this unit, important areas to cover with native speakers are maintaining a relationship with the audience, fillers, ways to extend definitions, preparing an opening for a definition speech, the importance of defining additional terms, and a discussion of procedural devices such as *let me*. Gesturing may also be a problem for some native speakers who still have fears about public speaking.