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## Case Studies for ELT: a source of motivation

*Études de cas pour l'enseignement de l'anglais : une source de motivation*

**David Thomas**

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## **CASE STUDIES FOR ELT: A SOURCE OF MOTIVATION**

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**Key-words:** oral participation, motivation, case study, core subject, teacher-developed material, simulated professional situation, evaluation.

**Abstract:** One of the difficulties of improving (foreign language) oral participation in the classroom context of an IUT is finding a suitable and efficient means of motivation. Experience indicates that one solution to this problem is the use of case studies which are tailored to adopt the core subject as the main theme. This may be done by the teacher with the help of authentic documents or, alternatively, by teacher-developed material based on reality. The objective is to place the students in a simulated professional situation in which they will find a correlation between the foreign language and the core subject(s) studied, thus providing an additional source of motivation for oral participation.

## **ETUDES DE CAS POUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'ANGLAIS : UNE SOURCE DE MOTIVATION**

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**Mots clefs :** participation orale, motivation, étude de cas, matière de spécialité, conception de matériel par l'enseignant, situation professionnelle simulée, évaluation.

**Résumé :** une des difficultés pour améliorer la participation orale (dans une langue étrangère) dans le contexte de la salle de classe en IUT est de trouver une source de motivation adaptée et efficace. Une solution à ce problème peut être l'emploi d'études de cas adaptées afin d'utiliser la matière de spécialité comme thème principal. Ceci peut être effectué par l'enseignant à l'aide de documents authentiques ou, alternativement, grâce à la conception par l'enseignant de matériel basé sur la réalité. Le but est de placer les étudiants dans une situation professionnelle simulée où ils trouveront une corrélation entre la langue étrangère et la (les) matière(s) de spécialité étudiée(s), fournissant ainsi une motivation supplémentaire de participation orale.

## **CASE STUDIES FOR ELT: A SOURCE OF MOTIVATION.**

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### **Introduction**

One of the difficulties in teaching English as a foreign language is oral participation, or rather the lack of it, in the context of the classroom. At the same time, the accepted premise indicates that oral classroom participation leads to improved oral proficiency in the language. This affirmation is supported by the research of a number of academics, such as Seliger & Shohamy (1989), ELLIS (1992) and others. In this article a classroom tool is described which may help ELT teachers in meeting the challenge of encouraging oral participation.

The principal stumbling-block where oral participation is concerned is often a lack of motivation, especially where English is taught to non-specialists who often have difficulty identifying the necessity for improving their linguistic proficiency. English is but one subject amongst many studied and numerous students, after careful calculation decide that, particularly where marks are concerned, it would be more profitable to concentrate on core subjects. In this case English becomes the poor relation, with a consequent drop in classroom participation. The problem thus becomes one of persuading students to use the language willingly in the classroom situation. The postulate is that one of the more efficient ways of doing this is to provide them with a specific source of motivation. This immediately gives rise to the question: 'What will motivate students to speak English in the classroom?'

The context of this article concerns students from 18 years upwards, studying business and who are supposed to have a working knowledge of the target language.

Their main interest is naturally directed towards the core subject, marketing, thus it is reasonable to assume that the provision of an obvious link between the core subject and English should be stimulating. However, professional observation indicates that this is not necessarily true. The use of text books on marketing, for instance, business articles from the press, authentic import-export documentation, methods of payment and others in English often fails to inspire. The problem is that

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each of the foregoing are seen as individual documents for which the students can see no global context: the study of a Letter of Credit and its mechanisms has no apparent link with the international marketing studied in the core subject, it is seen rather as a linguistic exercise divorced from any tangible reality.

### **Definition and role of a case study**

It was therefore decided, some 15 years ago, that one tactic would be to provide students with a context within which they could situate the different elements as part of a coherent whole. There are three possible routes which could be followed.

The first is role play. According to Maley (1984):

In role-play the key factor is that the participant is asked to play the part of someone else. He is usually given more or less detailed information about the person he is to play and the situation he is in, and then gets on with it.

This option was rejected because it would allow students reduced liberty in composing their role within the context of the overall situation.

A second possibility is simulation. Again, according to Maley:

In simulation [...] the participant plays himself, but in a situation which is pre-determined [...], he handles the situation in his own way, as himself.

According to the above definition the student does not have the possibility of exploiting a professional role within the confines of the given situation.

Thirdly, there is the case study. Albert (1983) defines the case study as follows:

The method of case studies may be briefly defined as the use of real life situations in companies for pedagogical reasons, studied individually and discussed in groups with the help of a teacher.

Knowledge of the fact that case studies form a major part of the curriculum in prestigious North American universities, such as Harvard, where the strategy has proved its worth as a teaching tool over many years, led to its adoption. This decision was reinforced by the views of Stern (1983), who says that:

An important aspect of all learning is the application or transfer of learning in the classroom to real-life situations.

### **Core subject as a source of motivation**

Having decided in favour of this, a search for available case studies was made. Several editors have produced collections of case studies specifically designed for language teaching and they are eminently suitable for the purpose. However, the initial premise was to use one tool for two distinct purposes: increasing oral proficiency in the language and at the same time providing a source

of motivation. Whilst the published case study amply fulfils the first criterion, it does not necessarily satisfy the quest for motivation. This naturally leads to an investigation of what does motivate a student. The answer is not easily found and will depend, to a large extent, on observation over a period of time. The principal source of motivation, in the academic context, will be the core subject, but again this will vary somewhat with time. External stimuli such as fashion, design, engineering, IT, communications, world events, etc., will all influence the focus of a student's attention. And since these factors are evolutive, a case study which is motivating one year may lose some of its attraction if used two or three years later when fashion, for instance, has moved on. It is for this reason that some published case studies may be considered as being somewhat lacking in the motivational factor.

### **Tailoring a case study to suit specific students**

One difficulty is finding a published case study to suit a specific core subject. And when a suitable one is found, it may well be that the level of language competence required does not coincide with that of the students concerned. It must be pointed out here that the object of this article is not to denigrate published case studies, many are excellent and serve a purpose. The aim is to strive for the highest possible level of motivation, and this is undoubtedly best done by tailoring a case study to suit specific students at a given time.

One possible solution for the language teacher is to elaborate a case study him- or herself. This can be based on fact or may be invented, but must have a clearly defined link with the core subject studied by the students and must interest them. As Maslow (1954) pointed out, interest, and particularly self-interest, and motivation are two aspects of the same thing. Therefore we can assume that if students are interested in a particular subject, they will be prepared to talk about it. And all the more so if the interest can be located within the terms of reference of the core subject.

### **Devising a case study in a foreign language**

A definition of a foreign language orientated case study designed for HND-equivalent and degree course students studying a specialised subject might be as follows:

"A foreign language case study is designed to place students in a simulated professional situation clearly linked to the core subject. The aim is to motivate them to speak the foreign language in order to discuss and solve a problem which interests them."

The question then becomes: 'How does a language teacher write a case study?' The first thing to do is to work out a plan of campaign, as it were, which might look something like this:

1. Find a subject which interests your students.
2. Work out a feasible link to the core subject.
3. Examine your extra-linguistic knowledge.
4. Imagine a problem which involves both 1 and 2 and which falls within the scope of 3.
5. Set the problem down on paper.
6. Consult specialists for accuracy of contents

### **Sources of inspiration and specialised knowledge**

This is an extremely simplistic plan and obviously gives rise to further questions. In the first place, how do you find an interesting subject? There are several solutions. The first, and most obvious one, is to ask the students what they are interested in. Unfortunately they are often reticent about coming up with ideas, or do not always understand what is required of them. A more useful strategy is observation. For example, some years ago over 90% of students were seen to be wearing branded trainers, which gave rise to a case study involving the marketing of a new brand. Advances in mobile phone technology was the basis for a study involving video-phones. Yet another example is the current interest in shorter working hours and more leisure time, which led to a case study concerning the marketing of cyclo-tours.

Another source of inspiration is current news articles. Chronic atmospheric air pollution in Mexico City inspired the invention of a (mock) individual shoulder-bag oxygen supply for people with respiratory problems - babies, pregnant women, asthma sufferers and so on - in big cities. It is up to the individual teacher to find a stimulating subject, one which is likely to interest students. This is the *sine qua non* of a successful case study, because if they are not keen on the subject, they will be less willing to talk about it.

It is, of course, necessary to find an object, a product or a service which can be linked logically with the core subject, but the field is so vast that the choice must be left to the teacher.

Finding a problem for the students to solve is relatively easy. How could you minimise production and marketing costs for a new brand of trainers? Would a video-phone using the domestic TV set as a screen be a marketable proposition? What would be the most cost-efficient method of targeting touring cyclists? How would you go about marketing a portable oxygen breathing apparatus? If in doubt, check with colleagues specialised in the subject.

Indeed, one challenge the language teacher may face is a limited knowledge of the students' chosen field of study or of the product. An example of this was the difficulty encountered in writing the case study on the individual oxygen supply, the solution being to enlist the help of colleagues specialised in engineering. The

majority of specialised colleagues, when solicited - with a clear explanation of what is needed - are all too willing to help with advice and suggestions.

### **Generating motivation**

Once a decision has been made about the subject of the case study, it then becomes necessary to set it down on paper in a way which will provoke interest. A simple iteration of the question 'How could you minimise production and marketing costs for a new brand of trainers?' is not really thought-provoking, indeed it is arid and may lead to discouragement. The subject needs to be introduced in a more indirect manner.

One way of doing this is to use an authentic document, if one is available, or alternatively to write a mock newspaper or magazine article. The case study on portable oxygen packs was prefaced with an alarmist article on pollution levels in Mexico City based on articles taken from *Time* and *Newsweek*. That on trainers started with a mock fashion report written specifically for it. In both cases, the articles served a double purpose. First, they provided a source of information, and thus of interest. Students wore trainers, therefore they were interested. Pollution is a subject that this age-group is concerned by and about. Secondly, writing specific articles makes it possible to introduce lexicographical references useful in the exploitation of the case study.

Having introduced the subject, the next step is to put the students into a simulated professional situation. Here it is difficult to set down guide-lines, since the proposed situation must necessarily depend on the subject. One solution is to write a scenario, for instance the creation of a company to market the new product referred to in the news article. This may be quite simple, 'Create a company in order to market this revolutionary breathing apparatus'. However, simplistic instructions of this kind do lead to a certain waste of classroom time, since the students are often not sure how to tackle the subject. It is usually preferable to give more details - after all, the objective is oral participation, not instruction in marketing. Examination of the case study related to pollution in Mexico City (Annex) will give ideas about how this can be achieved.

### **Putting the students on the right track**

Inevitably, once the case study has been launched the teacher will be faced with questions of a technical nature. Typically, 'How much does 30 seconds of advertising on TF1 cost during prime time?' A most useful and complete reference work in this field is '*Media-Poche*', published by Mediapolis Ressources. Or, 'What does the customer do when the oxygen cylinder is empty?' Tell them to invent a network of depots where the empty cylinder can be exchanged for a full one. Although it is not realistic to hope to foresee ALL the possible questions (would that one could!), planning ahead should allow the teacher to detect the majority of such (eventual) problems. If a particularly thorny problem does arise, one useful

tactic is to put it to the class as a whole. It is often surprising what students are capable of coming up with and an intelligent solution can be adopted by everyone.

Whilst the scenario helps to put the students on the right track, it is also useful to give a list of points that need to be considered, so that work progresses more swiftly. Unfortunately, some students regard this list as definitive and consequently limit themselves to dealing with the points mentioned. Behaviour of this kind is inevitable and although it does to some extent obviate initiative and imaginative thinking, it should not be considered as an obstacle - once again, the aim is oral production in a foreign language and NOT instruction in the core subject.

### **Group work**

At this point the way in which the case study is used must be taken into consideration. It can, of course, be used with the class as a whole, but this makes it possible for the less-enthusiastic students to abstain from participating. A better method is to divide the class up into smaller groups of four or five students who will study the case together.

There are several advantages to doing this. Firstly, many students find it easier to work in a small group than in a class of 20 or more. Secondly, it brings into play group dynamics. According to the principles laid down by Lewin (1959) and amplified by Mucchielli (1983) the output of a group is normally greater than the sum of its members, and this seems to hold true for foreign language case studies. Emulation is seen to play an important role in this kind of situation, and also the fact that the more proficient students in English tend to help the weaker ones, thus performing the role of substitute teachers, whilst the weaker ones, linguistically speaking, are often able to provide ideas and transversal knowledge.

The use of small groups of 4 or 5 students does however create a problem: how should the case study be exploited linguistically? Although there are a number of solutions, the one which has proved to be most efficient is for each group to prepare a 15-20 minute "exposé" setting out the proposed solution. This is a formal option and can take place in front of a jury, composed of one or two language teachers and/or specialist teachers competent in the foreign language involved. The alternative would be for the language teacher to initiate a discussion by the members of the group as to the action to be taken.

Although an informal discussion is feasible, in order to respect the proposed definition of the case study the formal option is the better one. Here, it is difficult to differentiate between case study and role play, since the students generally assume the roles of those persons who would participate in the decision-making scenario. This makes it possible for both conflictual and consensual roles to be played, to introduce negotiation, to simulate anger or humour, in short, to bring into action the whole range of objective and emotive communication likely to be encountered in a real-life professional situation.



### **Assessment**

However the case study is exploited, assessment is also a form of motivation: published marking criteria can indicate the number of marks allocated respectively to language and to contents. A jury of two increases the practicality, validity and reliability of the marking and eliminates any suggestion of biased assessment, important in the light of the recent (January 2002) polemic at Harvard University, home of the case study, concerning high marks for high fees.

To encourage both cooperation and individual effort from all, it is necessary to award both group and individual marks because although the case study does provide a source of motivation there will always be a minority of students who, for whatever reason, tend to leave the other members of the group to do most of the work, but who unjustly profit nevertheless from a good collective mark. To avoid this it is preferable to allot two marks, one collective, based on group performance, and a second, individual mark based on linguistic content, and to weight the individual mark quite heavily. This system tends to practically eliminate the phenomenon of lazy or recalcitrant students.

### **Timing**

'When should a case study of this kind be used?' There is little point in giving students a complex problem of this nature until they have acquired sufficient knowledge in the core and allied subjects to be able to deal with it. Ideally, the end of the teaching year would appear to be the most profitable moment to introduce work of this kind, but it is most useful to inform students at the beginning of the year that a case study will be used at a given date. This information provides yet another source of motivation: knowing that they will be faced with a relatively complex problem at a later date has the effect of encouraging them to improve their linguistic skills throughout the year, and it also gives them a goal, a light at the end of the tunnel, as it were. However some language teachers might prefer to start the case study earlier or even to spread it out over the year.

### **Use of modern technology**

One effect of IT is the greatly increased use of English-language Internet sites as sources of information during the preparation period of the case study: students will often download appropriate material in order to illustrate their exposés. This last point leads automatically to a word of caution. It is advisable to limit the use of technical supports during exposés - VCR's and computers can lead to a considerable waste of time and are not necessary, especially since the material has not been developed by the students but 'copied', and as such does not provide evidence of linguistic ability. An overhead projector to show a plan, original artwork etc., is admissible, as is the use of telephones, mobile or fixed.

**Conclusion**

The case study in foreign language teaching is only one tool amongst many available to teachers, but some 15 years of using this method systematically, with both first and second year students, has shown that, when correctly integrated into the curriculum, it does provide a very useful source of motivation in the acquisition of foreign language skills. The work of devising, preparing and editing a case study of this nature may seem somewhat daunting at first sight, but the rewards well outweigh the trouble taken.

The author would be more than willing to give assistance to anyone envisaging writing his or her first case study.

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## ANNEX

### How much more pollution can we take?

A thick pall of pollution hung low over the city, reducing visibility and causing passers-by to cough and choke, their lungs deprived of life-giving oxygen but rather filled with that soup of diesel and petrol fumes, wood-smoke and factory chimney corruption commonly known as smog. An old lady, bent over her walking-stick, coughed painfully as the stink penetrated her tired lungs. Further along the street a young woman leaned anxiously over the pram containing her newborn daughter. Her face was tormented as she watched the infant, face bright red, struggle to get enough oxygen into her tiny lungs to keep herself alive.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the above was taken from a science fiction novel. It is not; it is a description of something that can be seen some 200 days a year in one of the world's largest towns, Mexico City. Certain atmospheric conditions cause the air above the city, which is situated in a kind of bowl at high altitude, to turn into a polluted mush. Lax industrial smoke regulations, motor vehicles that are not subjected to exhaust gas emission controls, millions of families using wood fires for cooking, all add up to one of the most polluted atmospheres known to man, and one of the deadliest, taking many thousands of lives every year.

Mexico City, whilst it is probably the most heavily polluted town in the world, is not alone in suffering in this way. London, Paris, Rome, Madrid, Tokyo and many others are similarly affected. And the most terrible aspect of it all is that things are getting worse, not better. Governments seem to be more interested in their national economies than in the well-being of their citizens. Profitability and performance of companies come before the health of individuals. True, some feeble attempts to improve matters have been made,

such as the French and Italian idea of only allowing cars with odd- or even-numbered plates on the roads when the pollution factor climbs above a certain level, but this is more lip-service to a perennial problem than an all-out attempt to find a real solution. Only when governments realise that the health cost of this pollution outweighs by far any small economic advantages found in maintaining the status quo, only then will changes start to happen and we will see pollution levels drop.

In the meantime, how can the poor old average citizen protect himself from this affliction? Well, he can stay indoors on bad days and keep all the windows shut, but that is not an eminently practical suggestion. He can buy surgical gauze masks and wear them when he ventures out, but their effectiveness is more than doubtful. He can buy himself a fully-fledged gas-mask, of the type used to protect troops from chemical weapons, but he will wear it only at the risk of being treated as a wimp by his colleagues. If he lives in Tokyo, he can at least dart from one oxygen booth to another, taking a quick sniff in each to give his heaving lungs a chance to hold out until he gets to his office with its filtered air conditioning.

In short, until the powers-that-be become somewhat more aware of what is happening in the big cities around the world, we must continue to suffer from this evil that we have brought upon ourselves with our passion for progress - if progress it really is. Suffer, and be prepared to see the phenomenon spread to smaller and more numerous towns, as the roads become ever more congested with vehicles spewing out clouds of minute particles destined to block our lungs far more effectively than any tobacco smoke.

David Thomas- London

### **Case Study**

Charles B. Dawson Snr., President of Dawson Prestige Holdings, a very large American conglomerate, read the foregoing article with great interest. He maintained that it was by intelligent reading of the world's press that one had the best chance of coming up with new products, and this article had given him an idea. Whilst it was indeed unlikely that the pollution problem would be solved in the immediate future, he thought he could see both a way to alleviate the sufferings of people living in the big conurbations liable to pollution, and a means of making money.

The result, after several months of hard work in the R & D department of PhysChem, a company belonging to the group and specialised in developing hi-tech products, was a gas mask with its own oxygen supply and regulator valve destined to be sold to the general public.

Once the prototypes had been manufactured and proved viable through severe testing, it was time to think about marketing. Here Dawson, who was a very astute businessman, decided that it would be best to try out the new product in a test country, and the one he chose was France, since he was very fond of Paris. Fond especially of the architecture and the feel of the city, the streets of which he loved walking.

Dawson Prestige Holdings had seven subsidiary companies in France, as follows:

- Duramine, a small pharmaceutical company
- Agcem, specialised in gardening tools and supplies
- Mobipose, which manufactured kitchen and bathroom furniture
- Nourrifour, producing oven-ready frozen dishes
- Voitiprod, a supplier of parts for automobiles
- Blancapp, manufacturing kitchen appliances
- Markex, a service company specialised in marketing consultancy

Mr Dawson sent a fax to Markex's Chairman, telling him to set up a think-tank whose job would be to produce a complete marketing plan for the new product, which was to be sold on a national level in France for 1 year, in order to test it. He would leave ALL the details to Markex, but indicated that he would have his own marketing experts in the United States check the plan, to see if it was coherent and logical.

Antoine Berthelot, the Chairman of Markex, was very worried by this message. He knew that Dawson was a very demanding man and that if his company did not come up with a really good marketing plan, his job was on the

line. Consequently he called in five of Markex's most experienced and brilliant marketing team members and gave them the brief, at the same time warning them that if the plan was rejected by the mother company's experts, all their jobs would be in jeopardy.

The members of the team took the documentation, technical specifications, prototypes, costings and other documents to an office at the top of the building, shut the doors, started up the coffee machine and got down to some heavy thinking. Their first action was to set down on paper all the things they could think of that had to be done. Once they had got this list, they started to divide the different elements up amongst themselves, each one handling his or her own speciality. They then scheduled a series of meetings, to report on progress, with a final meeting to present their final marketing plan to Mr Berthelot. Since the plan had to be sent in English to the U.S.A., it was decided that this presentation would be done in English, recorded and typed-up by one of the two bilingual secretaries in the company.

Here is the list of considerations that resulted from the initial brainstorming:

- Definition of product
- Name of product
- Product positioning
- Market segmentation
- Targets (potential customers)
- Pricing policy and individual prices
- Different models needed (babies, adolescents, adults, etc.)
- Which Dawson company in France will sell the product?
- Where to sell the product - geographical, sales outlet?
- Advertising Budget €2.3m. Breakdown? Choice of advertising agency?
- Advertising campaign - national or regional?
- Advertising media
- Investigate possibility of producing accessories to carry the apparatus.
- 2 graphs required: 1) Projected sales forecast by volume for first 3 years  
2) Projected profits for first year on a monthly basis.

### **Product specifications**

The product consists of three distinct parts, the oxygen cylinder, the regulator valve and the mask with hosing.

#### **Oxygen cylinder**

This is a stainless steel pressure cylinder, 6cm in diameter by 25cm in length. It has a clip at the top to which can be attached a shoulder-strap for convenience in carrying it. In normal use this cylinder will last for 1 hour of continuous use. It will be possible to manufacture several other sizes of cylinders, depending on the usage required - the size will be determined by the time each cylinder is required to last. The general appearance is rather "clinical"; it may require "dressing-up".

#### **Demand regulator valve**

This is a small, square mechanism which screws into the oxygen cylinder. It is black in colour. It incorporates a microprocessor which is normally programmed to deliver one breath of oxygen every five natural breaths. This program may be changed anywhere from one-in-three to one-in-ten, but the duration of the cylinder will naturally vary with the program. An up-market model is available which incorporates a meter showing how many minutes of oxygen remain, assuming a standard cylinder and standard regulator program. Since the regulator is of the demand variety, there is no need for an on-off tap.

#### **Mask**

This is a transparent mask which fits over the nose and mouth and is held in place with an elastic strap around the back of the head. Transparent plastic is used in an attempt to make the mask as unobtrusive as possible. By the same token, the hose used to link the mask to the regulator valve is also transparent. The mask may be simply pushed down to hang around the neck when not in use, or taken off and put in the pocket.

### **Costing**

The cost of manufacturing the different parts of the equipment is as follows (these are given in Euros, even though the manufacture takes place in the U.S.A.):

Oxygen cylinder	€8.70
Carrying strap	€0.53
Regulator valve (standard model)	€6.9
Regulator valve (de luxe model)	€11
Oxygen hose	€0.40
Oxygen mask	€4
Elastic strap	€0.30
Total cost	€20.83 (standard model)
	€24.93 (de-luxe model)

The final cost, delivered DDP Paris, will be €34.6 for the standard model and €39.18 for the de-luxe model. It will cost €0.3 to refill the standard 1-hour cylinder with oxygen. This will be done by Air Liquide, in a plant near Paris, under contract, on an exchange basis.

### **EXPOSÉ**

YOU are the Markex marketing team! Your job is to go over the preceding information and that contained in the annexes, and then to prepare a report which will be given verbally in English for recording by a bi-lingual secretary to be sent to the U.S.A., It will contain the action you think should be taken in order to carry out a successful launch of the product, from both the marketing and advertising points of view. All arguments must be justified. In order to do this you must take into account everything you have learnt about the marketing mix, packaging, brand image, advertising and so-on.

The purpose of the “exposé” is to prepare the report. You should be as professional as possible in your approach to the problem. The form of the “exposé” is entirely up to you; we do not wish to be too directive in this matter. It can take the form of one or a series of meetings, flashbacks, projects, interviews, etc. However, it is essential that you make it perfectly clear to the jury at all times exactly what is happening: the use of table markers indicating the current scene is strongly advised. Do not forget introductions and appropriate transitions.

If you so wish, you may of course present documents to the jury. These should take the form of transparencies on an overhead projector. If you wish to do this, the transparencies **MUST** be typed and easily readable - do not hesitate to make full use of the computer facilities available to you - automatic graphic generators, word processor, etc. Remember, a transparency typed with a 12pt. font will be very difficult to read once projected; use at least 18pt fonts, and simple ones, such as Arial or CG Times (W1).