

Basic Steps to Producing Proper Presentations

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1. Introduction

In recent times, oral presentations in EFL have returned to language teaching curricula, particularly at the university level. Proponents describe the skills developed as necessary for young job-seekers in the ever more competitive and internationally-minded Japanese job market. Further benefits include greater confidence in speaking in front of peers particularly when using the L2, as well as the development of autonomous decision-making and critical thinking skills. Opponents commonly view presentation classes as non-communicative in an era where the communicative language teaching approach is dominant. This paper seeks to expound the benefits of a well-executed oral presentation class from the student perspective and offers five pieces of advice on how best to enable EFL learners to become more effective and imaginative presenters with a focus on lowering classroom anxiety.

2. Origins and evolution

The origins of the presentation can be found in rhetoric which Cicero defined as “speech designed to persuade” (Eidenmuller, n.d., Scholarly Definitions of Rhetoric section, para. 3). The modern presentation has since been defined by Ellis and Johnson (1994, p. 222) as: “a pre-planned, prepared, and structured talk which may be given in formal or informal circumstances to a small or large group of people. Its objective may be to inform or to persuade”. In recent times, presentation skills are considered increasingly beneficial as: “With globalization graduates need to be proficient in oral communication skills in order to function effectively in the professional setting” (Živković & Stojković, 2011).

3. Background

Research into presentation-based EFL classes and their validity is extensive. According to Lave and Wenger (1991, in Artemeva, Logie, & St-Martin, 1999), “theories of Situated Learning focus on the relationship between learning and the social situations in which learning occurs; learning is seen as distributed among co-participants” (p. 306). This describes a social process in which learning begins with observation and graduates to production through a step-by-step process of co-participation, situated within Vygotskyian socio-cultural theory. The collaboration is structured upon continuous peer and self-review as well as teacher feedback. In order to make this process as communicative as possible, many EFL teachers in Japan including myself encourage students to “take initiative, think beyond the mandated textbook, and use language creatively, purposefully, and interactively” (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010, p. 227). In effect, students are enabled to use the language they are learning to communicate with others,

thus gaining both L2 knowledge and the confidence to deliver within a communicative language teaching setting. “The ability to communicate is the most important goal that communicative language teaching aims to reach. It is to be able to operate effectively in the real world” (Hedge, 2000). Whilst my own approach to the presentation class is still evolving, this short paper will present my own class experience in a single semester, its effect on the student group and what I learned with supporting data and anecdotal evidence.

4. The student group and course

The class comprised 23 second year, non-English major university students, 5 of whom had never made a class presentation before in English. The required elements of the semester study were 3 in-class presentations and 3 essays. In response to a survey administered at the beginning of the school year, 10 students expressed anxiety about speaking English in front of their classmates and of those the single most challenging aspect was deemed to be making meaningful eye contact whilst speaking. Other published papers on the subject have focused on cultural reasons for the reticence of Japanese students to deliver opinions before their peers, notably Miles (2009). This paper instead seeks to recommend 5 steps in order to reduce classroom anxiety in general. In any case, the instructor’s goal should be to construct a positive challenge with a view to making the course: “a rewarding and stimulating experience both for teachers in developing facilitating skills and for students in training themselves to have confident presentations in public”(King, 2002).

5. 5 Fun Steps for Proper Presentations

5.1. Nicknames

In order to conduct this study, nicknames were assigned to students in order to protect their identity. However, as the semester proceeded, these proved a welcome stress relief for the students when it came to regular class participation and to presenting. Further, they adopted a new persona with their European nicknames that they greatly enjoyed and were soon motivated and relaxed to perform.

On this: “I enjoyed communicating with my partner and group! And thank you for giving [me a] cute nickname!!!” (Misha’s class reflection).

5.2. Topic selection and content

It is key to select broad presentation topics that are well within the reach of the students’ English proficiency, in particular when selecting the first topic. This is a key element in building student confidence and lowering classroom anxiety. Ideally, students should be involved in refining the topics as this personalization will most likely lead to greater autonomy in preparation phases and ultimately enhanced output. In this course, students were able to refine their presentation topic with excellent results. (See Chart 1 below).

In order to create a balanced course, these stimulating presentation topics should be discovered in similarly involving macro-lesson stages whilst the level of challenge is gradually increased. The level of challenge relates to both expected presentation length and to required participatory elements in regular

class. Activities should be selected in order to mirror the interests of the class group and should be selected and adjusted accordingly by the instructor.

Chart 1 details the final topic selections of the student group for presentation. Personalisation allows for the recall of personal memories, relived as anecdotes and greater involvement in the preparation, delivery and reception of presentations. “I remember(ed) when I was a child” (Chessa’s reflection).

Chart 2 shows relative student interest in the language elements (micro) and structural elements (macro) of the presentation preparation tasks.

Chart 1. Student topic selections for Presentation 2 – My Favourite Place n=23

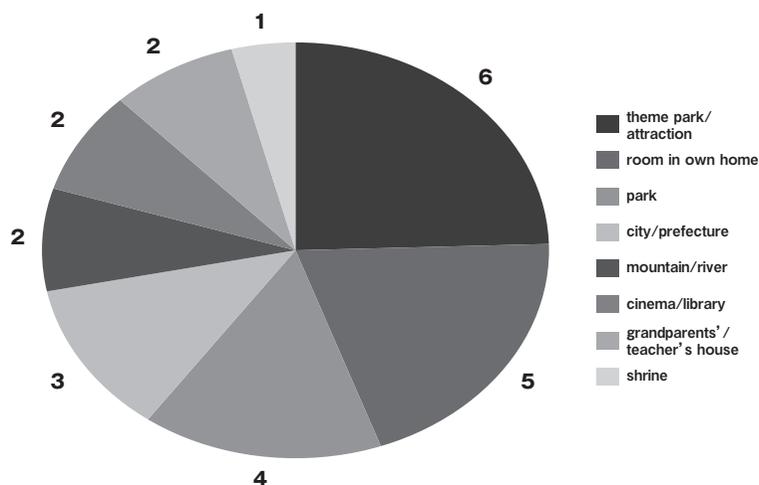


Chart 2. Week 9/15 class stages rated for interest, usefulness and difficulty n=23

Table2
June 2016 -average lesson ratings for interest, usefulness and difficulty
(average rating of each class activity)

Activity	Rating values				Rating values				Rating values			
	1 not at all	2 not so	3 quite	4 very	1 not at all	2 not so	3 quite	4 very	1 not at all	2 not so	3 quite	4 very
	Interesting				Useful				Difficult			
	N = 23				N = 23				N = 23			
Watch DVD	2.87				3.13				2.09			
Practice Gestures	3.43				3.13				1.91			
Review conversation stages	3				3.52				2.61			
Complete brainstorming map	3				3.65				2.65			
Write plan sheet	3				3.70				2.74			
Review vocabulary sheet	3.17				3.91				2.3			

Source: Data taken from one university 2nd year non-English major class

5.3. Practice

In this course, the class group was encouraged to practice in a circle that enabled their voices to blend but not to be drowned out. This group practice immediately prior to each assessed presentation effectively counteracted the feeling of isolation students felt when asked to perform in front of the group that again lowered individual and class anxiety levels. It also introduced students to time management and the handling of visual aids as they had the opportunity to perform in the presence of but not for others. The second stage was to allow students to choose a partner to present to enabling students to focus on the style of their partner, consider interactive elements such as eye contact and pacing as well as benefit from some informal feedback.

According to one group member “I learned from my friends about my presentation. I want to make more great (sic) presentations” (Sasha’s class reflection).

5.4. Visual aids

Another effective tool in reducing class anxiety is to encourage the inclusion of visual aids in class presentations. Students felt more relaxed and comfortable talking about their favourite watch, soft toy or bag when holding it and this contributed greatly to the interest levels of the audience. When watching a student performing a presentation whilst holding a visual aid, audience members reacted to and interacted far more with the presenter who showed less signs of stress when facing smiles, encouragement and general interest. Although the group under review began with no visual aids, without prompting they soon produced pictures, boxes, sporting equipment and even an 80 cm high teddy bear in order to illustrate and strengthen their presentations. Due to this, it has become necessary to raise the level of challenge and the group has at the time of writing entered a PowerPoint phase. This offers the further benefit of catering to different learning styles.

Here is a representative student comment:

“I learned how to do [my] presentation from other people. Next presentation, I want to use pictures” (Margo’s class reflection).

5.5. Feedback

Feedback is a key element to consider when planning and constructing an effective oral presentation course. In this semester of the course, 3 types of feedback were used. Peer-based feedback was collected during each presentation class as those listening were required to comment on A4 sheets on macro-structural elements of each presentation they heard. Students were encouraged to write positive but objective comments on the presentations of their group members, which were collated and distributed in the form of a mini-newsletter at the beginning of the next class (see Appendix A). Indeed as the class soon successfully fulfilled many elements of the presentation rubric, the challenge needed to be broadened with the introduction of direct feedback in the form of a question and answer session at the end of each presentation. (Many thanks to Professor Matthew Taylor for this among many other ideas). This feedback session was further structured with a personal feedback sheet, the second type of feedback offered. Students were given the opportunity to expand on their presentation experience and to set personal goals for their next presentation. (see Appendix B). The third feedback element became common error and

general structural feedback from the instructor. In this course, instructor feedback was minimized in order to encourage the student group, maximize student autonomy and develop further class-interactions relating to the presentation sessions in English.

With reference to feedback, students stated:

“I will make full use of (the) reflection of the presentation last week. I understand improve point of my presentation (Anja’s class reflection).

“I could presentation better than before. I’m so happy” (Marci’s class reflection).

6. Future Adjustments

The oral presentation class format offers great freedom to the instructor for modification and personalization. At the time of writing, the student group is preparing the fifth topic of six in the course for a 4-minute presentation followed by a 3-minute question and answer session. Indeed, planning has needed to be adjusted as the Q/A sessions generally run over into open forum discussions and sharing of anecdotes and personal history in English. These sessions are structured with worksheets that students complete whilst listening to their peers, that is to say they are actively listening and noting questions down. What is more, students have exceeded course requirements at each stage until the current time and are producing ideas independently, including the PowerPoint visual supports. Presenters have become more animated at each stage and the listeners more involved. The idea of collaborative preparation and presentation is one potential adjustment that would offer students the experience of working together to produce their presentation. In order to do this, the assessment criteria would be a key consideration.

7. Conclusion

In a phase where the communicative language teaching approach dominates EFL classes, the oral presentation class is sometimes avoided or misrepresented. However, according to King, oral presentations have been shown to help bridge the gap between language study and language use, that presentations require students to use all four language skills in a naturally integrated way, and that presentations have been shown to encourage students to become active and autonomous learners. One of the keys to success is to lower student anxiety and to make the course more student-centered. Even within the Japanese university classroom, teachers who structure an exciting and positively challenging oral presentation course may well be happily surprised by the performance and positive feedback of their student groups. It just needs to be presented to student groups in the most appropriate way.

References

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Appendix A

K_____ G_____ University -
Presentation 2 Feedback sheet 😊

I want her to
not look at the
paper.

Please
more big
voice

Speak
faster.

Presentation a
little short.

Shaking body.
Better
aestures.

She didn't
see us.

Please
speak
smoothly

Pronunciation is not
clear.

Appendix B

K_____ G_____ University: 2nd Year, Spring 2016

Student name: _____(English) Date: 2016/6/28

Course Title:English Communication **After Presentation 2 feedback.**Instructor:

Seth Wallace

E-mail: _____@kinjo-u.ac.jp

Notes/Questions:

I enjoyed the presentation this time on “My Favorite Place”. My structure was better than presentation 1 on “A Good Friend” and I felt more confident.

Still, I want to improve, especially _____.

In presentation 2, I felt that _____

_____.

For presentation 3, I want to _____

_____.

I also understand that presentation 3 will be longer, between 3 and 3.5 minutes.

Presentation schedule:

Week	English Communication C(1) Tuesdays 2,3
6	Unit 1 – A good friend (Major Presentation)
10	Unit 2 – A favorite place (Major Presentation)
14	Unit 3 – A prized possession (Final Presentation)
15	Review, testing, make-up presentations , fun activities