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Using Oral Presentations to Improve Students' English Language Skills

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Abstract

Many university students in Japan have only a limited amount of exposure to spoken English prior to entering university. However, for these students to succeed in the university environment, and in their future jobs, it is necessary for them to be able to express their ideas clearly in spoken English. Oral presentations provide teachers with a learner-centered activity that can be used in the language classroom as an effective tool for improving their students' communicative competence. However, one of the drawbacks of using presentations in the language classroom is that students often find oral presentations extremely challenging. If oral presentations are not set up correctly, the difficulty of the tasks involved in presenting in front of others can take away from the pedagogical benefits of using presentations in the classroom. Because of this it is important that the language teacher understands the skills involved in giving presentations, and the potential difficulties oral presentations can present for second language (L2) learners. This paper outlines some of the benefits of implementing oral presentations in the L2 classroom as well as some of the difficulties involved in using presentations in university language classes in Japan. It then lays out a framework for implementing presentations in the classroom in a way that is beneficial for both the participants and the practitioners. It is hoped that the pedagogical ideas outlined in this paper, can help teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes effectively employ oral presentations as a means of improving their students' English language abilities.

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I. Introduction

1. The use of oral presentations and spoken English in Japan

One of the issues facing Japanese university students today is that very few students are given the opportunity to use spoken English in the classroom before entering university, and even less have the opportunity to talk about academic topics in English (Apple, 2011). While high school teachers in Japan seem to recognize the benefits of having their students engage in communicative activities (Browne & Wada, 1998) they are under extreme pressure to prepare high school students for entrance exams, which often results in them focusing on vocabulary and grammar drills as English communication gets left by the wayside. Other constraints, such as large class sizes and a lack of training in communicative language teaching, are also given as reasons why high school teachers feel they are not able to use communicative activities in their classroom (Taguchi, 2002). Even in oral communication classes most of the class time is taken up by “teacher-fronted, drill-oriented activities” (Browne & Wada, 1998, p. 108) leaving little time for students to actually use English to communicate with other students. What little spoken English students are asked to produce in the classroom usually consists of more “traditional methods such as choral repetition” (Nishino, 2008, p. 30) rather than tasks that require students to speak to one another, or to present their ideas to a group.

Japanese students' inexperience using spoken English also extends to oral presentations. Before entering university, most Japanese students are not given the chance to experience standing in front of their peers to give an oral presentation. The Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbusho) recognized the importance of public speaking for Japanese high school students when they

revised the high school English curriculum in 1994. This new curriculum places an emphasis on improving students' ability to communicate and even includes an elective oral communications course that focuses on the skills of speech and debate (see Table 1). However, this class is rarely taught. In a survey of public high schools in Chiba prefecture Browne and Wada (1998) found that less than 9% of high schools in the prefecture included the Oral Communication C course in their high school curriculum. While this survey was done in 1998, more recent surveys (Endo, 2008) still support the claim that most students at the high school level are not being taught how to give presentations. This lack of familiarity with oral presentations causes most Japanese university students to feel uncomfortable and shy when they are asked to use English to speak in front of their peers.

Table 1 Summary of Monbusho-dictated high school English courses (Browne & Wade, 1998, page 107).

Required first year English courses	
English I	General English
Elective English courses for second and third year students	
English II	General English
English IIB	Reading
English IIC	Writing
Oral Communication A	Speaking
Oral Communication B	Listening
Oral Communication C	Recitation, speech and debate

Even at the university level not many non-English majors are given the opportunity to do oral presentations (Tsou & Huang, 2012). This is especially true for students who are not enrolled in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program. In fact, many first year students at Japanese universities have not even had the experience of giving an oral presentation in front of their peers in their first language (L1).

The lack of opportunities to practice oral presentations in their language classes means that most high school students, and many university students, do not get to experience the positive impact that these types of activities can have on

their language ability. This can have a negative effect on their language proficiency and their overall development as active participants in, and members of, the English language community.

2. Oral presentations as communicative learning activities

Now more than ever, EFL teachers in Japan are trying to make their classes more communicative. This is done by encouraging students to “take initiative, think beyond the mandated textbook, and use language creatively, purposefully, and interactively.” (Al-Issa & Al-Qubtan, 2010, p. 227) One of the driving forces behind this communicative approach to language teaching is the socio-cultural theory of language acquisition that comes, in part, from the writings of Levi Vygotsky. In socio-cultural theory one of the most important factors in second language (L2) acquisition is that learners are able to use the language that they are learning in meaningful activities. As socio-cultural theorists see language as a social phenomenon, the only way for students to improve as L2 learners is if they are allowed to use the language they are learning to communicate with others. Students who are not given the chance “to interact with other members of the discourse community remain outside the language community, and therefore fail to learn the language.” (Apple, 2006, p. 286) Therefore, it is important that language teachers include tasks that allow students to use the language skills that they have learned to communicate with others in the classroom.

One of the benefits of using oral presentations in the classroom is the opportunity that they present for learners to use their L2 to communicate with others in a natural way. If the activity is properly scaffolded, participating in an oral presentation can provide students with an enjoyable learning experience that allows them to interact with others using only their L2. This is because presentations require the students who are giving the presentation to use only English to communicate an idea to one or more interlocutors. This type of communication is one of the most important goals of communicative language teaching. Also, oral presentations, especially group presentations, allow students to engage in a cooperative task that requires them to use English to explain their ideas and to negotiate meaning with a larger community of language learners while they are planning and practicing their presentations.

II. The importance of oral presentations

1. The benefits of using oral presentations in the language classroom

Oral presentations have been shown to be extremely successful with respect to improving learners’ L2 skills, and increasing their autonomy. For example, Girard, Pinar and Trapp (2011) found that using oral presentations in their classroom lead to greater class interaction and participation, an increased interest

in learning, and noticeable improvements in their students' communication and presentation skills. King (2002) adds that 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.

For most language teachers the five major benefits to using oral presentations in the classroom are:

- They are student-centered.
- They require the use of all four language skills.
- They provide students with realistic language tasks.
- They have value outside the language classroom.
- They improve students' motivation.

One of the main benefits of using presentations in the classroom is that oral presentations are student-centered. When students are asked to give an oral presentation it is one of the few times in the language classroom that the students themselves have direct control of both the content and the flow of the classroom (Apple & Kikuchi, 2007). This is because the students who are presenting have the ability to choose the topic that they want to talk about, select the language items that they want to use to talk about that topic, and decide how they will explain that topic to their classmates. With little or no intervention from the teacher, a properly scaffolded presentation can result in multiple opportunities for students to improve their English in a context in which the students themselves are acting as both teachers and learners.

Interactions between the presenters and the audience provide both sets of participants with numerous opportunities to practice their English abilities with other students in an authentic manner. Oral presentations also provide students with a process-driven activity that requires them to use English, not just while they are giving the presentation itself, but also while they are preparing to present. One good example of this is group presentations. Group presentations require students to work together to plan and prepare for their presentation. During group work students can be encouraged to use English to negotiate meaning with the other members of their group and to work together, in English, to plan how they will present their ideas to the other members of the class. This facilitates English use to meet a specific goal, in an authentic way, and with very little intervention from the teacher.

Another benefit of oral presentations is that they require students to use all four language skills; writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Most teachers

recognize the spoken component of presenting, as students are required to speak when giving their presentations. However, properly structured academic presentations also require students to research and plan out their presentation. This requires students to use their L2 reading and writing skills. Students also have the opportunity to practice their writing skills when they are asked to give presentations that include some type of visual component. When they are preparing for these presentations students will have to write out the appropriate information on their poster or in their PowerPoint slides. Finally, students have the opportunity to practice their listening skills when they act as the audience members for the other groups' presentations. If these students are given a simple task to do during the presentation, or are expected to use the knowledge disseminated through the presentation for a specific purpose, this will allow them to use this opportunity to practice their listening skills. The communicative nature of presentations also allows audience members to improve their listening skills more than listening to a tape or a lecture would because they are able to confirm their understanding by asking questions and interacting with the presenters.

Oral presentations provide realistic language tasks for students to engage in. This is important because speaking tasks that have no relation to real-life language use "are poor preparation for autonomy." (Thornbury, 2005, p. 91) Presentations also provide a more authentic way of practicing English than simple speaking drills. This is because they require students to use their L2 to understand the topics they are presenting on and communicate this understanding to others. This is closer to real language use and gives students an opportunity to develop research and critical thinking skills, as well as linguistic and communicative skills..

Presentations have also been shown to improve students' abilities in ways that can be beneficial for their future employment (Živković, 2014). This is especially true in the EAP or ESP context, where there is a much higher chance that students will be asked to use English to present in their future jobs (Bruce, 2011). However, even beyond the EAP and ESP context, experience with oral presentations can be beneficial to students future careers because many potential future employers place a high degree of importance on the communication skills that students learn during a presentation class. Nowadays many employees are looking for candidates who have the ability to give formal presentations, and the skills that students learn when they are presenting in English are transferable to their L1 (Pittenger, 2004).

The final benefit of using oral presentations in the language classroom is that they can provide students with additional motivation to study English. Oral presentations do more than just give students an opportunity to practice language

skills; they also give students an opportunity to teach something to their peers. If the activity is properly scaffolded, students will be able to work independently to produce an effective presentation. This can lead to higher levels of motivation for the students involved, as they are able to see the results of their hard work when they are successful in the presentation that they give. One of the joys of teaching a presentation class is seeing students gain confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy while they are working independently, or as a small group, to produce and give an effective presentation.

2. Issues with using oral presentations in the language classroom

Despite the numerous benefits associated with using oral presentations in the language classroom there can also be some negative consequences, especially if the presentations are not properly implemented in the class. Chiu (2004) describes her experience with presentations in Japan as one where “the presenters stumbled through their long and formally written presentation speeches, while the rest of the class would try hard to stay awake.” (p. 32) The main reason for this is that presentations that are not set up correctly can be too difficult for the students to do effectively and this creates a learning environment that is not conducive to L2 acquisition. Meloni and Thompson (1980) provide an example of the worst-case scenario of not setting up a presentation class correctly. In their example the students in the class end up choosing inappropriate or uninteresting topics, which, in turn, leads to listeners who are inattentive or disrespectful. It also causes the students to give a poorly thought out presentation leaving the instructor unsure as to which errors they should be correcting during the presentation. According to these researchers, the end result of this process will be a group of students who dislike oral presentations, and an instructor who believes that students gain nothing from giving oral presentations.

The reason for many of the problems associated with using oral presentations in the L2 classroom is that many students “lack the core fluency” (Jordan, 1997, p. 203) required to give an effective oral presentation. This means that if students are not taught the skills that they lack, they will not be able to present effectively. If the difficulty of the presentations being assigned is beyond the students' current English language abilities, or if the steps required in giving a presentation are not properly scaffolded, students will not be successful in their presentations. This will cause students to feel unprepared or uncomfortable when asked to present. Speaking in public in this type of situation can actually undermined students' confidence and is “ineffective in developing students' oral proficiency because students (are) put on the spot.” (King, 2002, p. 403)

Another issue with using presentations in the classroom is that they are time-consuming, and during much of the time when the students are presenting

the audience is passive, which can lead to boredom (Ross, 2007). For this reason, oral presentations are often not used in language classes, or are only used as one-time summative assessment at the end of the course, with very little class time spent on getting the students ready to present. The result of this is that students are not prepared to present and often do not find the presentations to be a positive learning experience. While there are a number of potential problems surrounding the use of presentations in the classroom, many of these issues can be avoided if the use of presentations is properly implemented.

III. Basic instructional design

1. Setting up the presentation class

As most Japanese university students have limited experience using English in meaningful and authentic situations, it is important to use a clear, step-by-step method for teaching presentations in English classes (Shimo, 2011). It is not enough to simply tell students to go and do a presentation. Students have to be taught the skills involved in giving a presentation. This can include such things as “when to use eye contact, how to organize a presentation, (how to) connect with an audience, (how to) use body language and manage time, and how to construct an effective PowerPoint presentation.” (Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008, p. 74) The next section of this paper looks at what teachers can do to ensure that they have setup the oral presentations in the classroom in a way that allows students to succeed. This is done by examining the presentation classes offered at two private universities in Japan and looking at what methods of teaching presentation have been successful in helping students to give good presentations.

The classes we looked at for this paper were made up of first and second year students and focus on academic presentations. In these classes students have the opportunity to develop and present at least 5 different oral presentations during two 14-week semesters. These presentations lasted from two and a half minutes, for the first presentation, to up to 25 minutes, for a final group presentation. In all of the presentations students are asked to select a topic and then write and give a presentation based on that topic. Each of the presentations was carefully broken down into stages, each of which consists of scaffolded tasks designed to introduce students to the skills needed to make a presentation. During the weeks leading up to their presentation students had to research, revise, and reshape their presentations both inside and outside the classroom.

Since oral presentations involve multiple communication and language skills, students were also given tasks that focused on teaching them the specific presentation skills that they needed to present in front of others. These included things like voice projection, eye contact and the use of gestures. Each of the

presentations was then graded using a carefully planned and constructed rubric with the grading criteria of each presentation clearly laid out in the materials to allow students be successful in meeting the assessment goals set out for that presentation. Finally, the presentations themselves were recorded and students were asked to watch their own presentations and engage in a self-reflection assignment that was designed to help them to improve in future presentations.

2. Organization of the presentation

Before students can begin to work on their presentation it is important that they understand the genre of the oral presentation. Giving students example presentations, done by the teacher or other students, can help to introduce them to the genres that they are expected to present in (Hovane, 2009). It is important for teachers to realize that the features of oral presentation may be unfamiliar to most of the students in the class and that they need to provide sufficient scaffolding to help students understand the requirements of the presentation. Part of this involves introducing students to the macro-structure of the genre that they are expected to present in. This means providing examples of presentations and having students identify each stage in the presentation sequence. For example, in their final presentation of the classes we observed students were expected to do problem solution presentations. This was broken down for the students into various parts which included an introduction, an explanation of the problem, an explanation of one or two causes of the problem, details about a possible solution for at least one of those causes, and an explanation of some possible drawbacks of the proposed solution. Separating the presentation into meaningful sections and teaching each section separately helps to reduce the cognitive work the students need to do to understand what is required of them in the presentation. Since the genres are usually unfamiliar to the students each of these sections need to be carefully introduced and students should be provided with adequate scaffolding to allow them to be successful when they are researching and planning each of the sections.

One way the classes we looked at for this paper did this is that they broke the larger presentation down into steps where each of the steps consisted of a smaller presentation. This allowed students to focus on a smaller, more manageable part of a much larger presentation. It also allowed students to present multiple times on the same topic, which proved effective in reducing the cognitive load required to learn new topic specific knowledge and vocabulary for each presentation, thereby giving students more time to focus on presenting.

3. Presentation skills

It is important for the teacher of an oral presentation class to spend time introducing students to both the macro and micro skills that they need to give oral

presentations. If this is not done then the students will not have confidence in their ability to present and “will feel that the teacher has just dumped them into the sea to struggle for survival.” (King, 2002, p. 406)

These micro level skills include the genre specific language items, such as the vocabulary and grammar that students need to be successful in oral presentations. These items are important to the students for two reasons. First of all, they allow students to be successful when they are presenting in the class. Secondly, the language and grammar students learn in the course of giving a presentation will be useful for them in other situations that involve spoken English (Thornbury, 2005). Because of this, the teaching of these genre specific micro-skills is of particular importance to student motivation, as most students believe that improving their English language speaking ability is the primary purpose of an oral communication class (Miles, 2009). Students who feel that the skills they are learning when they are doing their presentation will be useful in other situations will be more likely to spend time preparing and practicing for their presentation.

In the classes in question this was done by first identifying a number of speaking skills that were needed in the presentations and then integrating those into the class. Parts of the course were set aside to explicitly teach and provide students with the opportunity to practice language and presentation skills specific to oral presentations. These included such skills as the use of gestures or teaching students the vocabulary and phrases needed for signposting. There was also time set aside for teaching grammar, language, and communication skills that were not necessarily specific to presentations. This included providing students with exercises that focused on the grammatical forms that were important for the presentation they were giving, having students do pronunciation exercises, and looking at conversation strategies such as word stressing, repetition, chunking, paraphrasing (For examples of activities that can be used to teach these micro-skills see, Gershon, 2008; Grussendorf, 2007; Powell, 2011). All of these skills were first taught in a focused context that was separate from the students' presentations. After the students had been introduced to a specific skill and had a chance to practice it they were then given time to work individually, or in small groups, to integrate the skill into their presentation.

4. The use of visual aids

One aspect of the presentation class that many students found especially beneficial was the use of visual aids. Visual aids are an important part of oral presentations because they provide support for both the speakers and listeners during the presentation, which can help to reduce stress and make the presentation more successful (Lambert, 2008). Visual aids can be used to give more details about the topic, help the audience members to understand what is

being said, and act as a concrete reminder of the message for both the audience and the presenter. The type of visual aid used can vary depending on the topic of the presentation. The classes observed for this paper started with simple visual aids, such as a photo or small item, and moved on to more complicated visual aids such as posters and PowerPoint slides.

In addition to providing support during the presentation, the process of designing and creating the visual aid gave the presenters a collaborative task, which helped to make the class more successful. Visual aids helped cater to different learning styles and some of the students who were not as savvy at the research and written part of the speech spent a lot of time helping to make the posters or PowerPoint slides with their group. This allowed for these students to engage in the topic in a way that they would not have been able to without the use of visuals. It also helped some of the students who were weaker at English but motivated to participate in the presentation to become valuable members of their groups, which helped to facilitate a more positive group dynamic.

5. Performing self reflections

The final stage of each oral presentation involved students writing a self-reflection of their own presentation. Students' presentations were recorded and students were then asked to watch the video of their presentation for homework. They were also required to answer several questions about the video that were designed to focus their attention on specific aspects of their presentation. This was found to be very successful as students were able to see issues in the video that they were not aware of while giving the presentation. These included things such as lack of eye contact, insufficient volume and clarity in their voices and inappropriate posture or movements during their presentations. Students were found to be surprisingly honest in these self-reflections and would often focus on the same issues that the teachers mentioned in the comments they wrote on the grading sheets. Furthermore, because the content of the presentations were often recycled and built upon in subsequent presentations, students were able to use the self-reflection activity as a way of seeing how they could improve in subsequent presentations. This was particularly evident with skills such as eye contact and voice volume and clarity, which often showed marked improvement after students had watched the video of their previous presentation, especially among students who noted they needed to improve in these areas in their self-reflections.

IV. Conclusion

1. Final reflections

From our experience with these presentation classes we have found that

presentations can be student centered, meaningful activities that students enjoy doing. We could see the students in these classes become more active learners and learn to enjoy taking part in creating their own content for the class. Talking to these students it became apparent that they viewed giving an oral presentation as a challenging, but rewarding, task. However, we also recognize that many second language teachers find it challenging to include oral presentations into their classes, as presentations require a significant commitment in terms of class time and planning. Despite the challenges involved in using presentations in the language classroom, we feel that they can be valuable activities in helping learners improve their L2 skills, develop their research skills, improve their creativity, and gain confidence speaking in front of others. They have also been shown to lead to increased student motivation and autonomy. However, for presentations to be successful it is important that teachers properly introduce and teach the various macro and micro level skills involved in giving a presentation. While the suggestions and ideas given in this paper for how to effectively use presentations in the classroom are by no means exhaustive, it is hoped that they will provide teachers with some basic guidelines for how they can use presentations in their own classroom. In turn this will allow them to use presentations as a means of improving their students' English language skills as well as their critical thinking abilities, and may even help their students to find a job in the future.

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