

Note

Notes on Reading Aloud at Academic Conferences

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Abstract

Academic presentation is an important part of the skill set taught in university EFL in Japan, which makes presentation in anglophone academic at large a valid field of inquiry. Many Japanese university students of English face with trepidation or even anxiety the prospect of public speaking in English without reading aloud. The writer investigates the practice of reading research papers aloud at academic conferences conducted in English. Due to constraints of time and place, the investigation was conducted entirely on the Internet. Despite the global presence of the internet, search results were unintentionally confined to an American milieu. Reference to discussion forum posts, blog posts and comments, and online articles and their comments showed the practice of reading papers aloud at academic conferences to be- at least in anglophone academia- a practice peculiar to qualitative, non-experimental fields given to close analysis and interpretation of text: history and other fields in the humanities. The more quantitative analysis is found in a field, the likelier it is that its scholars do not read papers aloud at their conferences. Academics who shun the practice of reading papers aloud at conferences describe the delivery method as boring, unengaging, needlessly old-fashioned, and eccentric.

Key words: academic English, academic text genres, public speaking, teaching presentation

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University students of mine have reacted with dismay at presentation assignments which forbid students to read their material aloud from a script. While I understand student difficulty, even anxiety, with the use of a foreign language in its spoken domain, and greater comfort levels with the written domain, I have reminded students that in the Anglosphere, presenters speak semi-extemporaneously from notes or slides: they do not read aloud.

Or do they? In 2017 I attended a conference in the field of cultural studies. While the venue was on the European continent, the official language of the conference was English, as is more and more frequently found. I attended about eight talks, and before the start of one particular talk, I was surprised to see no screen for a projector, and no podium for a presenter to stand at: just a table and chair. I assumed that the speaker must be injured or disabled, and unfit to stand to deliver her presentation. A moderator introduced the speaker, who then walked to the table, sat down, and read steadily aloud for fifteen to twenty minutes from a multi-page document- an unpublished paper, she later said- in her hands, with no illustrations or graphics or any visual information for the audience.

How was the audience taking this? I searched discreetly (I hope) through the rows of attendees and met some surprised, confused glances, while others listened in placid acceptance.

I have attended seven other conferences besides this one and have never seen, or even heard of, a presenter reading aloud. I have wondered what factors could have made it more likely for this scholar to read a paper aloud at an English-medium academic conference. Was this a European convention? (Not likely, from my experiences at other conferences in Europe.) Was this an older practice, a habit of researchers over a certain age? Was it her field of cultural studies? (Most conferences I have attended have been in education: more specifically, in TESOL in Japan and the rest of Asia.)

The gold standard of reporting in the social sciences is the in-person observation of behavior by a trained observer. I would be delighted to observe multiple academic conference presentations across many disciplines, but this is obviously unfeasible. A much more practical option is to read internet commentary on academic conventions and practices.

I searched the internet for any reference in English to speakers reading papers aloud at academic conferences. (The conventions of academic gatherings not conducted in English, while intriguing, are beyond the scope of my research.) Although my search terms didn't include any references to institutional names, geography, or time, search result texts were nearly all written in American (not British) English, and places cited were usually in the United States. Search results are also clustered in the years 2006 and 2011 to 2013.

One reason that sources for this paper were produced in such narrow windows of time is the conversational structure of much writing on the internet: comments on articles, discussion forum posts, and blogs and their comments. One reference to reading papers aloud at academic conferences- usually a complaint about it- would attract a sudden flood of responses, often within a single day, only for the topic to fade from importance soon after.

A factor that affected time and physical location of sources is *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a news organization based in Washington, DC, that reports on United States academia. Many references to reading papers aloud at academic conferences first appeared in *The Chronicle* or on its affiliated websites, which kept the discussion in an American milieu. One *Chronicle* reader who contributed to its weighty presence in the anglophone Internet's discussion on reading papers aloud at academic conferences was Eastern Washington University historian Larry Cebula, a declared opponent of the practice. Mr. Cebula posted a humorous essay on the topic to a *Chronicle of Higher Education* discussion forum (larryc, 2012). The essay was later published in the *Chronicle* itself (Cebula, 2013). Both appearances attracted passionate commentary in favor of and against the convention of reading research papers aloud at academic conferences. On March 8, 2011, Mr. Cebula started a poll asking *Chronicle* forum members whether it was a convention in their discipline to read aloud at their conferences (larryc, 2011). Unfortunately, when the *Chronicle of Higher Education* archived its discussion forums in 2014, the results of this poll were lost to the public. (Forum posts remain accessible without the use of a password.)

I wish to emphasize that it was never my intent to bar any material from outside the United States: I would have preferred to gather information from all of anglophone academe. If Google has an American bias, that is the subject of another scholar's research.

Not all sources were as informal and individualistic as forum posts and blog comments. My search terms also yielded statements and guidelines from scholarly associations and university departments- still overwhelmingly American- that referred to the act of reading a research paper aloud at an academic conference.

It quickly became apparent that the variable that informants agree determines whether a presenter will read aloud or not at a conference is the field of research, rather than any demographic factor. (An interesting pursuit in the future would be an investigation within one field of academic research comparing conference presentations where scholars read aloud with those where presenters do not read aloud.)

I chose to contrast reading aloud with not reading aloud, rather than with an affirmative construct, such as "slides" or "notes" or "extemporaneous speaking."

This is because a conference presenter may perform various actions, some in combination, that are not reading aloud. I divided areas of academic research into *reading fields* and *non-reading fields*. If an area of academic research was named as one in which reading papers aloud at conferences was the practice of the commentator-informant (without an additional claim that this broke with convention), or was conventional or expected, I counted this as one mention of it as a reading field. If an area of academic research was cited as one in which a conference presenter would not be expected to read aloud, or in which the informant never read aloud, I counted this as one mention of it as a non-reading field. This reliance on affirmative or negative references to reading aloud means that an affirmative reference to a conference convention of, for example, using presentation slides would not count toward a reading or non-reading field: a speaker may present slides and still read aloud.

If a reference to reading or not reading a conference paper aloud did not include a mention of an academic discipline, then it doesn't appear in the table below. Informants refer to academic disciplines with varying degrees of specificity. Sometimes an informant refers to the practice, not of a field of inquiry, but of a particular academic society, e.g. the Western History Association or the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Scholars in smaller fields might use descriptive terms (e.g., "between the social sciences and the humanities" [carebearstare, 2011]) in an effort at anonymity. Many commentators simply declared themselves for the humanities or for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). I use informants' own words to name their fields; therefore, many fields listed in the tables overlap.

Some informants who perform research in fields that include both readers and non-readers at conferences will contrast these two subgroups of their areas in great detail. Msparticularity (2011) divided researchers in her field of education into those who conduct "empirical research in education and the social science of education," who don't read papers aloud, and "theoretical and highly detailed" investigators of the "sociological foundations of education," who do. When an informant claimed that both reading and non-reading presentation methods were conventional in their field, that field earned one count each, for reading and non-reading.

I also constructed two much smaller categories: references to instances of reading described as exceptional or unexpected in that field, and references to instances of non-reading described as exceptional or unexpected in that field. These exceptions are worthy of note but do not prove any rule.

Table 1 Reading fields

archaeology	(digger, 2010)
historical and philosophical foundations of education	(msparticularity, 2011)
research which “is theoretical and highly detailed” into the “sociological foundations of education”	(msparticularity, 2011)
English	(Dr. Crazy, 2010)
	(Dr. Crazy, 2010 b)
	(jds 2006, 2006)
	(seniorscholar, 2012)
	(shastymcnasty, 2011)
	(supernumerary, 2006)
environmental studies	(totoro, 2012)
Geography	(prof_smartypants, 2012)
History	(anonymous B, 2010)
	(bookishone, 2012)
	(egilson, 2011)
	(egilson, 2012)
	(erzuliefreda, 2012)
	(Feminist Avatar, 2010)
	(Historiann, 2010)
	(larryc, 2011 b)
	(larryc, 2012 b)
	(larryc, 2015)
	(mOOm, 2011)
	(Navickas, 2013)
	(overthinker, 2006)
	(prof_smartypants, 2012)
	(prof_twocents, 2013)
	(proftowanda, 2012)
	(Rees, 2010)
	(Rees, 2010 b)
	(Rees, 2011)
	(sugaree, 2011)
(sugaree, 2012)	
(thefrogprincess, 2010)	
(winnie, 2006)	
archival research in history	(Susan, 2010)
Western History Association	(Conrad, 2013)
	(Rensink, 2013)
humanities	(anonymous C, 2011)
	(anonymous I, 2011)
	(bwwm 1, 2011)
	(Campbell, 2013)
	(Dr. Crazy, 2010 b)

	(frogfactory, 2012 b)
	(Redman, 2010)
	(schultzc, 2013)
	(slinger, 2012)
	(Strelnikov, 2011)
	(sugaree, 2012 b)
	(Wampole, 2015)
	(winnie, 2006)
some humanities	(tinyzombie, 2015)
humanities research	(fraa_jad, 2012)
humanities or social science	(cranefly, 2011)
a field “between the social sciences and the humanities”	(carebearstare, 2011)
“theory laden” research in Japanese studies	(takingitoutside, 2010)
Literature	(bookishone, 2012)
	(corny, 2012)
	(lizzy, 2011)
	(mended_drum, 2011)
	(tinyzombie, 2012)
	(winnie, 2006)
literary analysis	(marigolds, 2012)
MLA [Modern Language Association] fields	(corny, 2012)
	(Lindemann, 2010)
	(lottie, 2011)
	(watermarkup, 2011)
musicology	(bibliothecula, 2011)
Philology	(jds 2006, 2006)
Philosophy	(115 thDream, 2013)
	(bookishone, 2012)
	(msparticularity, 2011)
	(periphrasis, 2006)
	(professor_pat, 2015)
	(psychle, 2006)
	(Stemwedel, 2006)
	(winnie, 2006)
Policy	(usukprof, 2013)
popular culture	(jds 2006, 2006)
Religion	(systeme_d_, 2011)
	(wet_blanket, 2011)
social sciences other than economics	(totoro, 2011)
text-heavy disciplines	(busyslinky, 2012)

Table 2 Non-reading fields

Accounting	(octoprof, 2011)
Business	(madhatter, 2011)
	(octoprof, 2011)
	(punchnpie, 2011)
	(Rees, 2010)
	(Rees, 2010 b)
Chemistry	(Stemwedel, 2006)
computer science	(charlottchen, 2011)
	(octoprof, 2011)
	(punchnpie, 2011)
Conference on College Composition and Communication	(madhatter, 2011)
Economics	(Rees, 2010)
	(Rees, 2010 b)
	(totoro, 2011)
Education	(madhatter, 2011)
higher education	(madhatter, 2011)
empirical research in education and the social science of education	(msparticularity, 2011)
sociological foundations of education	(msparticularity, 2011)
engineering education	(Zuska, 2006)
Engineering	(fraa_jad, 2012)
environmental studies	(totoro, 2012)
Geodesy	(reythia, 2013 b)
History	(Conrad, 2013)
	(erzuliefreda, 2012)
	(llanfair, 2013)
	(prof_smartypants, 2012)
	(sugaree, 2012)
human geography	(totoro, 2011)
some humanities	(tinyzombie, 2015)
library science	(collegkidsmom, 2011)
Linguistics	(watermarkup, 2011)
Literature	(spork, 2012)
mathematical physics	(Knop, 2006)
music outside musicology	(voxprincipalis, 2011)
Psycholinguistics	(anonymous, 2010)
Psychology	(madhatter, 2011)
	(psychle, 2006)
experimental psychology	(anonymous F, 2011)
Science	(Comrade PhysioProf, 2010)
	(cranefly, 2011)
	(JaneB, 2010)
	(Navickas, 2013)
	(schultzjc, 2013)

hard sciences	(sciencephd, 2011)
health sciences	(madhatter, 2011)
natural sciences	(arpodah, 2013)
	(mOOm, 2011)
social science(s)	(anonymous H, 2011)
	(anonymous J, 2012)
	(merinoblue, 2012)
	(Navickas, 2013)
	(normative_, 2011)
	(wet_blanket, 2011)
most social sciences	(mOOm, 2011)
Sociology	(anonymous E, 2011)
STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics)	(anonymous D, 2014)
	(arpodah, 2013)
	(johnr, 2011)
	(oldsirfaulk, 2012)
	(reythia, 2013)
	(slinger, 2012)
	(STEMDoctor, 2011)
	(ttsnow, 2011)
	(usukprof, 2012)
training and development	(madhatter, 2011)

Table 3 Reading as exceptional

American Astronomical Society	(Knop, 2006)
science	(anonymous G, 2011)
science and engineering	(polly_mer, 2018)
social science	(anonymous H, 2011)
Sociology	(anonymous E, 2011)

Table 4 Non-reading as exceptional

English	(wellfleet, 2011)
German Studies Association	(Vazansky, 2013)
	(Jones, 2013)
History	(Rensink, 2013 b)
	(sugaree, 2011)
	(thefrogprincess, 2010)
Philosophy	(frogfactory, 2012)
Poetry	(frogfactory, 2012)
“non-science-y”	(Zuska, 2008)

Internet commentary shows reading papers aloud at academic conferences to be a practice peculiar to qualitative, non-experimental fields given to close analysis and

interpretation of text: history and other fields in the humanities. The more quantitative analysis is found in a field, the likelier it is that its scholars do not read papers aloud at their conferences, but speak from notes, a graphic display (typically presentation slides), or even extemporaneously.

The issue of the reading/non-reading dichotomy is raised in the first place by observers who are surprised at, or who dislike, reading aloud at academic conferences. It is then up to scholars in reading fields to defend their practice. I did not see any instance of the opposite: an exchange begun by a humanist's complaint of scholars who don't read aloud when they present research results at conferences. Criticisms of poor presentations based on notecards or slides did not lead to calls for presenters to read aloud, but they sometimes became praise for reading aloud at conferences.

Quantitative researchers' surprise at humanists reading aloud at conferences was more observable than the surprise of read-aloud scholars at non-reading presentation methods. Humanists also mentioned astonished reactions to their fields' practice of reading aloud. Its proponents claimed that reading aloud from a prepared document kept the speaker's ideas organized and prevented the presentation from taking more than its allotted time. Yet these exchanges never included affirmative imperatives to switch to a reading format.

Commentators who dislike presentations in which papers are read aloud describe the delivery method as boring, unengaging, and difficult to follow, but also characterize it as needlessly old-fashioned and even eccentric. Yet the non-readers rarely describe their own presentation methods as affirmatively "new" or "modern." This is an act of "othering," of the naming of an entity as outside an (often unnamed) norm.

Presentation skills are a well-established topic in EFL education, especially in formal education at the secondary level and above in Japan. University students who expect in their future careers to present proposals or research findings outside Japan especially need training in this communicative genre. The methods, practices, and conventions of presentation and public speaking in English are therefore a necessary field of inquiry for research in EFL education in Japan.

As an instructor of students in fields of quantitative analysis of experimental results, I will not teach my students to read verbatim as a presentation method. (Indeed, I never have.) English programs at high schools that expect their students to go on to academic careers in which they would be expected to present research at academic conferences conducted in English would serve their students well by impressing upon them how specific and relatively rare it is to read aloud at an academic conference, and how English-speaking scholars react to it.

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