TEACHING PRESENTATION:
IMPROVING ORAL OUTPUT WITH MORE STRUCTURE

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Abstract

In many second language (L2) communication classes the majority of the class time is taken up by teacher-fronted, drill-oriented activities. Oral presentations are one example of a learner-centered, communicative activity that can be used to fix this problem. However, if not implemented 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 language teachers understand the skills involved in giving an effective presentation, and the potential difficulties oral presentations can cause for L2 learners. This paper focuses on one genre of oral presentations, the poster presentation, and examines the benefits of using poster presentations in the L2 classroom. It draws upon the practical experience the authors have gained from teaching and developing materials for presentation classes to provide a framework for how poster presentations can be used in the language classroom. By examining the tasks involved, and the pedagogical justification behind those tasks, it is hoped that this paper will encourage language teachers to use poster presentations in their classrooms in a way that benefits both the students and the teachers.

1 Introduction

Many students feel that one of the major problems with oral communication classes is that they do not provide them with adequate opportunities to use English to communicate with others in the classroom (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Even though most teachers recognize the need for students to interact with their peers in their second language (L2), large class sizes, a curriculum that focuses more on grammatical accuracy than on communicative competence and a lack of time or training on the part of the practitioner are all reasons that language teachers give for why they are not able to provide students with sufficient opportunities to use spoken English (Browne & Wada, 1998; King, 2013). Even when students are asked to speak in English they are not usually asked to communicate with their peers and this oral practice usually consists of more "traditional methods such as choral repetition" (Nishino, 2008, p. 30) rather than tasks that require students to actually speak to one another.

Oral presentations are one activity that teachers can use to give their students the opportunities they need to communicate with other students in their class using English. They are also a process-based, communicative activity that can provide students with an enjoyable way to use English to communicate with their classmates. This, in turn, can result in an

overall improvement in the students' motivation to learn English. Oral presentations have also been shown to help improve students' English language abilities (Thornbury, 2005). However, despite the obvious benefits of using presentations in the classroom, very few university students are given the opportunity to do oral presentations in their L2 classes (Tsou & Huang, 2012).

1.1 The benefits of using oral presentations in the language classroom

Numerous researchers have shown the benefits of using oral presentations in the classroom. Girard, Pinar and Trapp (2011) found that, along with helping their students improve their communication and presentation skills, using oral presentations allowed their students to interact and participate more in the classroom, which increased their students' interest in learning English. Other researchers have shown that oral presentations can also benefit students by helping them to bridge the gap between language study and language use (King, 2002).

One of the main benefits of using oral presentations in the classroom is that they are student-centered. Presentations are 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). Another benefit of oral presentations is that they require the use of all four language skills; writing, reading, speaking, and listening (King, 2002). Students are required to use their reading and writing skills to research and write their presentations. Presenting in front of the class requires students to use spoken English. Students then also have the opportunity to practice their L2 listening skills when they are asked to act as the audience members for other students' presentations.

Oral presentations provide a more authentic way of practicing English than simple speaking drills. 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 require students to use their L2 in a natural way because they are required to use English to understand the topics they are presenting 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.

Another benefit of oral presentations is that they can help provide students with additional motivation to study English (Hovane, 2009). This is because 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 oral presentation for this purpose. This type of goal-oriented activity 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 giving their oral presentation.

Finally, presentations are useful not only because of how they can be used to improve students' communicative abilities and motivation in the classroom, but also because of the benefits they can provide for the students in the future. Researchers have shown that participating in presentations can be beneficial for students' future employment (Živković, 2014). This is especially true in the English for academic purposes (EAP) or English for

specific purposes (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 EAP and ESP contexts, experience with oral presentations can provide students with skills that will be valuable when they are seeking employment. Many employers place a significant amount of importance on their future employees' abilities to give formal presentations. Even if the employers are not looking specifically for employees that can give presentations in English, the skills that students learn when they are presenting in English are transferable to presentations in their first language (Pittenger, 2004).

1.2 *Issues with using oral presentations in the language classroom*

Because oral presentations can be challenging and often include unfamiliar tasks for many students, they can potentially present many problems for students if not properly implemented in the classroom (Meloni & Thompson, 1980). Because of this many teachers who have tried using presentations in their classes have reported that they found them to be a time consuming activity with little or no pedagogical value (Ross, 2007). However, one of the main reasons for this has been that oral presentations need to be properly scaffolded if they are to be effective (Sundrarajun & Kiely, 2010). If not properly scaffolded, many problems can occur throughout the presentation including students choosing inappropriate or uninteresting topics as well as students being inattentive or disrespectful when listening to other oral presentations. The poorly prepared presentation that can often occur in this situation also presents a problem for the instructor, as they may be unsure as to which of the students' errors they should be correcting. In the worst-case scenario this can lead to a group of students who end up disliking oral presentations, and an instructor who believes that students gain nothing from giving oral presentations.

Another problem with presentations is that they require a lot of time and effort to implement correctly in the classroom. Teachers have to carefully limit the amount of cognitive demands the presentations put on the students as many EFL learners "lack the core fluency" (Jordan, 1997, p. 203) required to give an effective oral presentation. This means that the presentation process needs to be broken down into manageable steps, and it must be made clear to the students what is expected of them at each stage of the presentation process. This requires that the various steps involved in giving a presentation be properly scaffolded, so that the students are given the support that they need at each stage allowing them to be successful in their presentations. If this does not happen, students will feel uncomfortable about giving their presentation in front of others, which, in turn, will undermine students' confidence. This is something that has been shown to be detrimental to "developing students' oral proficiency because students (feel like they are being) put on the spot." (King, 2002, p. 403)

Another issue with using presentations in the classroom is that they are time-consuming, and this is because in many oral presentations only one student can present at a time. The students who are not presenting are often left to be passive members of the audience, which can lead to boredom (Chiu, 2004). For this reason even teachers who feel that presentations could be beneficial for improving their students' English language abilities may only use them one time during the semester, usually as a summative assessment at the end of the course. However, this does not need to be the case and there are a number of things that teachers can do to ensure that all members of their class benefit from both giving and listening to oral presentations.

1.3 Poster presentations

Poster presentations refer to a type of academic presentation that uses a poster as the main visual aid for the presentation. Thornbury (2005) describes a typical poster presentations task:

> (It) starts with, the learners, working individually or in pairs or in groups of three, prepare a poster on a pre-selected theme.... Half the students then stand by their posters while the others circulate, moving from poster to poster, asking questions about each one, with a view to getting as clear as possible an idea of its content (p. 87).

The decision to use poster presentations in the course, rather than PowerPoint or another type of academic oral presentation was based on three main points. The first of these was because use of posters as a visual aid has been shown to help reduce the amount of stress felt by the students while giving the presentation (Lambert, 2008). This anxiety is one of the major negative factors connected to using oral presentations in the classroom and, unless it is addressed, the stress involved in giving an oral presentation can negatively affect the pedagogical benefits of the presentation (King, 2002). Secondly, poster presentations allowed students to give their presentation multiple times and also allowed for a type of interaction between the audience and presenter that was not possible with more structured academic presentations. Finally, incorporating posters into the class allowed for a level of creativity from the students that would not have otherwise been present. Making posters allowed students to showcase their creative style and helped cater to different learning styles. This became evident when some of the students who were not as savvy at the research and written part of preparing their presentation spent a lot of time helping to make the posters with their group, which allowed them to have a greater stake in the presentation. This in turn helped to improve group dynamics as even the students who were perceived as weaker students in terms of their English skills were able to contribute productively to the group's presentation.

2 An overview of the course

The course discussed in this paper was a content-based class in which a significant component of the class focused on poster presentations. This course was designed with the purpose of providing first-year university English majors at a Japanese university the opportunity to use English on a topic of interest to them with the goal of encouraging the students to become more communicative in their L2. This eight-week course titled "Global Youth Culture" was intended to have students discover youth culture, both in Japan and in other countries. The course involved lectures, group and class discussions and reading activities that were designed to raise awareness about the assumptions Japanese youth have about their own and other countries' youth cultures. This was done with the goal of dismantling these assumptions and opening genuine dialogue about youth culture. During the fifth and sixth week, students were placed into larger groups of six or seven and asked to decide on a country to research as a group. Each group then had to prepare two posters and each member of the group was required to prepare and present oral presentations on a different aspect of youth culture using a poster. During weeks seven and eight students either presented on their country, or acted as engaged audience members for the other group oral presentations.

As we were aware that most of the university students enrolled in the class would have a limited experience with both oral presentations and poster presentations, it was important for

us to use a clear, step-by-step method for teaching the students how to do oral poster presentations. Previous studies had shown that this approach was necessary if we wanted students to succeed in their presentations (Shimo, 2011). In order to do this students received input from the teacher with regards to the appropriate content of their presentations as well as instruction in the skills required to do poster presentations. These included "when to use eye contact, how to organize a presentation, (how to) connect with an audience, (how to) use body language and manage time (Otoshi & Heffernen, 2008, p. 74)."

The presentation component of the class was structured around meeting four specific goals, two of which focused on delivery skills while the other two focused on content and structure. The first of the delivery skill oriented goals focused on verbal delivery skills while the second covered non-verbal delivery skills. Both of these goals were intended to get the students to be able to present in a manner appropriate to social interaction (Jeon & Hahn, 2006). Students practiced projecting their voice and demonstrated control of voice by use of stress, pausing, intonation, volume and silence. Additionally, students concentrated on positive body language including eye contact and posture, as well as the use of effective gestures.

Students were also expected to be able to conduct basic Internet research and take notes, which helped produce speaking points for the oral presentation on the topic they chose. This involved having the students be able to (1) choose a topic appropriate for the presentation; (2) select content appropriate to the presentation topic and genre and (3) organize their content effectively. The final goal was related to the poster itself. For the purpose of these presentations students were expected to be able to create a poster that connected with the audience through appropriate visuals. Students were also required to find photos on the Internet that reflected their aspect of youth culture.

3 Step 1: Planning the presentation

3.1 Researching and writing the presentation

One of the most overlooked aspects of a presentation class is the assistance students need to research and prepare their presentation. While tasks such as internet research may seem simple to many teachers, even high level students have been shown to have problems with "the use of key words, narrower subject headings, bibliographical details or other known materials to locate information" (Bankowski, 2009, p. 189) in a search engine. In the past we discovered that students who attempted to give their presentations without adequate instructions on how to get information for their presentation ended up producing presentations that lacked substance. Also, when students were unsure as to what to put in their presentation, they tended to not plan or practice their presentation prior to class, which had a significant impact on the quality of the presentation itself. To discourage this behavior, students were given instructions on how to search for information and examples in the lectures on what type of information was considered to be appropriate for their presentations. Presentation weightings were reduced and homework spot checks were introduced to ensure that students kept pace with the course and were prepared when class time required presentation practice. Students were also asked to participate in small group discussions and larger class discussions that focused on the same topics that they were presenting on. After groups had decided on their country and the aspects of youth culture they would be talking about they were then

required to make short weekly presentations to their group, or in front of the class. These activities served as a way of keeping students on task while allowing them to practice some of the presentation skills they would need for their oral presentation in a more controlled and less demanding situation.

Students were also asked to do assignments in class or at home that helped to familiarize them with the structure of the presentation. Homework assignments included reading about youth culture in Japan, brainstorming topics, writing presentation scripts, reviewing presentation practice videos and preparing visuals for their posters. Additionally, students were shown videos of example presentations and given the scripts of those presentations. These example presentations could then be used as a template for the students' own presentations.

3.2 The use of visual aids

One aspect of the presentation class that many students found especially beneficial was the use of posters as 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. While the types of visual aid used in academic presentations can vary, in this course all of the participants were required to use posters. The type of posters that students created varied with the topics being discussed and the artistic skills of the group members. Some groups created elaborate posters using their own drawings while others were satisfied with creating a collage of materials they had acquired from other sources. However, most of the groups, even those that felt they were lacking in artistic talent, seemed to enjoy the task of creating the posters. This allowed them to showcase their own creative style while using both visuals and English to communicate information to the audience.

3.3 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 needed 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)."

The micro level skills taught in this course included things like genre specific language items, such as vocabulary and grammar, that students would need to be successful in their 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). In the past we have found that when students feel that the skills they are learning when they are doing their presentation will be useful in other situations, they will be more likely to spend time preparing and practicing for their presentation.

In our classes we identified a number of speaking skills that the students would need in their presentations and then integrated those skills 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. This included providing students with exercises that focused on some of the skills required for giving oral presentations (For examples of activities that can be used to teach these micro-skills see, Gershon, 2008; Grussendorf, 2007; Powell, 2011).

In weeks one through five, time was set aside for students to practice these skills. During these weeks students were asked to give short one to two minute presentations in small groups then larger groups to reduce the fear of presenting in front of others. These presentations started simple and became progressively more academic in nature. During week one, students gave mini-presentations about themselves, their interests and family to become acquainted. In subsequent weeks, students shared their homework notes and discussed answers to questions about youth related cultural phenomenon and activities. Students were provided with feedback, individually or in plenary, about their use of presentation skills during these activities. Students were then given the help that they needed to improve upon these skills in subsequent lessons. These regular tasks served as manageable mini-presentations that were designed to increase student confidence and encourage dialogues about something familiar. These short discussions could subsequently be built up to a longer discussion of a more complex topic. Additionally, we found that repeated mini-activities reduced the stress that is often part of presenting in front of others.

4 Step 2: Giving the presentation

4.1 Setting up the presentation

Leading up to the day of the presentation students were given very clear instructions about what to expect on the day of the presentation. This included a timetable of what groups would be presenting, instructions about what was expected of both the presenters and the audience on those days and details with regarding how they would be assessed on their oral presentations. These instructions served a dual purpose. It helped to ensure that the poster presentations ran smoothly and it also helped to reduce the students' anxiety by providing them with a clear outline regarding what was expected of them during the presentations.

Prior to poster presentations, the oral presenters as well as those who would be acting as audience members were given a handout with bulleted points reviewing the roles of the poster presenters and audience members. The students then previewed a short video from a previous poster presentation session. This video showed the different steps involved in the poster presentation including the setup of the poster, the role of the audience and some clips of actual presentations. The clips of the presenters were clips that students had previously been shown during the planning stage of the poster presentations. However, they were included again to remind the presenters how they were supposed to engage with the audience members and what presentation skills were expected of them. The inclusion of these videos had a positive effect on how students prepared for their oral presentations, especially those with lower levels of English. After previewing the video, students were then able to discuss the pre-taught expectations with each other and ask questions to their instructor to clarify any

unclear details. During this time a copy of the grading rubric was distributed and students were reminded of how they would be evaluated during the poster session.

4.2 Giving the presentations

Poster presentations took place over two weeks, during two ninety-minute classes, with half of the group presenting week seven and the other half during week eight. On the day of presentations, students attached their 60 cm x 80 cm posters to the walls inside the classroom. The following information was included on the poster: the country researched, photos representing each poster presenters' aspect of youth culture, small captions or topic information, and though not required, relevant or supportive statistical data. Notes were not permitted because, in essence, the poster was a speaking prompt for the aspect of youth culture researched by the student presenter. The other students either a) walked around the room freely and interacted with each group or b) or moved from poster to poster, like a carousel, and asked questions, actively listening and assessing the posters and the presenters. Though the authors have used both methods, the "carousel" is recommended to reduce the possibility of a group not having an audience to present to and to ensure that every audience member has an opportunity to engage with each group of poster presenters. The carousel also allows for a greater degree of structure in the poster presentation, and if a timer is used to signal when the presenting groups have to start and stop, it ensures that all of the groups present for the required time. The authors preferred regulating the time to make sure that oral presenters did not speak for too long or too short of a time period and to allow time towards the end of the poster sessions for a debriefing. Having a timer brought a natural start and closure to each of the repeated sessions. One advantage of having students repeat their information to their audience is improved communicability and confidence. During the poster presentation, the audience is encouraged to ask questions in reference to the poster. This in turn prompts the speaker to share knowledge on the topic researched and adds more of an interactive nature to the presentations.

4.3 Assessment and feedback

The authors, from the beginning of the course, stressed the importance of being communicative throughout the course, but more so during the oral presentations. In the context of the oral presentation, being communicative meant (1) having a completed and interesting poster; (2) using the poster as a speaking prompt; (3) having an oral discussion about their chosen aspect of youth culture with the audience; (4) answering questions from the audience; and (5) enjoying the process. These five points were reinforced when students previewed the oral presentation video and again on presentation day prior to the start of the presentations. Student posters were evaluated on design and creativity (A+, A, B, C, incomplete) and given a 1-5 score for communicativeness, audience engagement and content. Given the limited time of this short course, feedback was minimal, often in the form of a written comment on the assessment page, or as an oral praise.

5 Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the things that teachers need to be aware of when using poster presentations in the classroom. It has also presented a number of suggestions for how teachers can successfully use presentations in their own courses. What it does not provide is a

one size fits all plan for what must be done in every classroom that uses poster presentations as part of the curriculum. This is because course design is a complicated process that is affected by the teachers' background and beliefs about teaching, the needs and backgrounds of their students and the requirements of their teaching situation (Williams & Burden, 2000).

The recommendations offered in this paper draw upon the authors' experience with using poster presentations in their own classes and are intended to act as a springboard for other teachers who are thinking about using this type of presentation in their classes. To this end, the authors highlighted some of the skills and procedures that we felt were important to consider for anyone integrating poster presentations into their own teaching. It is hoped that teachers will look at this paper as collection of suggestions about what can be done to effectively use oral poster presentations in the classroom. It is also hoped that it will start a dialogue among teachers who are interested in using, or who are currently using, poster presentations as a way to develop their students' English language skills. By sharing our ideas and experiences we can work together to provide our students with the tools they need to succeed as language learners.

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