

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FOR ORAL PRESENTATION SKILLS: A CASE OF JAPANESE ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study investigates how Japanese English learners can improve their English oral presentation skills through collaborative learning, which is an umbrella term for interactive group work. Previous studies have primarily used cognitive approaches focusing on individual development in teaching presentation skills; few studies to date have investigated this topic from sociocultural perspectives considering the interaction between individuals and the sociocultural contexts. Eighteen Japanese undergraduates joined this one-semester-long study. The study included a) group presentation of reading assignments, b) collaborative learning, and c) presentations of projects. The collaborative learning included three steps: practicing focused presentation skills, receiving feedback from their peers, and discussing ways to improve their presentation skills. At the end of the semester, the students responded to an 18-item questionnaire about what they learned and how they improved their skills. The research employed thematic analysis on the three open-ended questions about how students improved their skills through collaborative learning. The analysis revealed that learners primarily found five benefits: noticing the gap, knowledge co-construction, overcoming weakness, behavior modeling, and psychological improvement. The findings of this study indicate the effectiveness of collaborative learning in co-constructing knowledge and skills in giving oral presentations in Japanese English classrooms.

1 Introduction

As the attention to speaking skills of learners who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) has increased, educational departments at various levels are increasingly required to foster EFL learners' communication skills, including writing and speaking abilities, as well as their ability to present information publicly (Van Ginkel, Gulikers, Biemans & Mulder, 2017; Tailab & Marsh, 2020). In addition, oral presentation competence has been considered one of the important competencies of highly educated professionals (Dunbar, Brooks & K, Miller, 2006), and an essential competence for a broad scope of disciplines within the academic field, such as Biology, Business, Communication, Engineering, and Health (Dunbar, et al., 2006).

Previous studies found that the opportunity to give oral presentations offers students deeper learning and understanding, contributes to the fostering of their linguistic ability, and reduces anxiety about giving oral presentations (Joughin, 2007; King, Young, & Behnke, 2000; Sundrarajun & Kely, 2010). Moreover, the importance of teaching presentation skills has been widely accepted in various regions as well as in EFL, especially in the Japanese education system, oral presentations have been assumed as one type of language learning activity for enhancing EFL learners' language proficiency and improving psychological characteristics such as self-efficacy and reducing anxiety in classrooms (Iimura, 2016; Kawauchi, 2012; Makino, 2014).

Further, the teaching of oral presentation skills has been studied for 30 years, especially in English speaking countries and Europe, and some researchers have proposed a learning cycle to enhance oral presentation skills (De Grez, 2009; Van Ginkle, Gulikers, Biemans & Mulder, 2015; 2017). However, studies carried out in the EFL context, especially in Asia, are not enough for generalizing the results of the effectiveness of teaching English oral presentation knowledge and skills.

In addition to the importance of learning oral presentation skills, the importance of collaboration has garnered much attention over the past two decades (Austin, 2000; Tran, 2021), and “collaboration” has been identified as one of the main “4 Cs” skills, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication, that all individuals need to succeed in the 21st-century society (Ochoa, 2022; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

However, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of collaborative learning (CL) in paired/small group interaction on learning oral presentation skills and knowledge. Motivated by this gap in research, the study aimed to investigate how Japanese English learners can improve their English oral presentation skills through CL. This paper begins with a review of previous studies and a basic definition of “collaborative learning” and “oral presentation” followed by the current study design, results, and discussion.

2 Literature review

2.1 Previous studies on collaborative learning

According to Smith and MacGregor (1992), CL has gathered much attention since the 1980s, and it can be defined as “an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students or students and teachers together. Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product” (p. 10). In other words, students work in paired/small group interaction to co-construct knowledge. Many previous studies have examined the effectiveness of CL and it was found to be beneficial for language learning.

The effectiveness of CL cannot be emphasized in a single explanation, but multiple perspectives can demonstrate the outcomes of CL. CL activities can allow learners to explain their thinking and ideas (Webb, Troper, & Fall, 1995) and share their own knowledge (Coleman, 1998). Moreover, in CL situations, talking with other students creates many opportunities for learning (Golub, 1988) and new understanding (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). In addition, CL offers learners opportunities to observe and imitate peers’ task strategies (Azmitia, 1988).

While most previous studies focus on the effectiveness of CL in situations of teaching writing (Nguyen, 2013; Smith & MacGregor, 1992), when it comes to speaking, Pattanpichet (2011) found that CL instructions in a speaking class were beneficial for improving English speaking abilities and developing a positive learning classroom atmosphere for Bangkok EFL undergraduates. That study reported three main opinions from the students about the CL activity: a) it brought a feeling of unity and familiarity, b) it gave them many opportunities to practice, and c) it provided continuous self- and peer review. The learners enjoyed and relaxed during the CL activity and shared their knowledge with their peers. In addition, they practiced and received feedback from themselves as well as from their peers.

More specifically, Nguyen (2013) examined the benefits of collaborative presentation tasks in learning EFL in Vietnam. Twelve learners submitted reflective reports and were interviewed. The results of the content analysis revealed six categories of CL benefits: “workload sharing, pooling ideas and resources, technology support, peer feedback, support in answering the audience’s questions, and effective support” (p. 70). During the collaborative presentation task in this study, the learners were able to help each other and overcome challenges in the task such as “lack of ideas, shortages of materials, limited technology skills and content knowledge” (p. 71), and “develop knowledge, skills (e.g., pronunciation, computer skills, and presentation skills), motivation, and confidence needed for completing the task” (p. 71). While the results of Nguyen (2013) supported the use of CL in group oral presentation tasks in EFL situations, more research examining the effectiveness of CL in speaking tasks (Nguyen, 2013). Moreover, it is necessary to examine the effectiveness of the CL task in improving their individual presentation knowledge and skills.

2.2 Previous studies on teaching oral presentations

Oral presentation competence can be defined as “a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to speak in public in order to inform, self-express, relate, or to persuade” (De Grez, 2009, p. 5). In other words, the competence concerns the exchange of a message with the audience (Haber & Lingard, 2001). Oral presentation competence is considered to be one of the important competences of highly educated professionals (Dunbar, Brooks & K, Miller, 2006) and an essential competence for a broad scope of disciplines within the academic field such as biology, business, communication, engineering, and health (Dunbar, et al., 2006). Moreover, recent studies have found that learners experience deeper learning through giving oral presentations and that giving such presentations enhances the linguistic ability of learners and reduces their anxiety for delivering oral presentations (Hida, 2022; Joughin, 2007; King, Young, & Behnke, 2000; Sundrarajun & Kely, 2010). Moreover, in English speaking countries and Europe, some researchers have proposed a learning cycle to enhance oral presentation skills (De Grez, 2009; Van Ginkle, Gulikers, Biemans & Mulder, 2015; 2017).

In Japan, only a few studies have examined the effectiveness of teaching oral presentation (Okada, Sawaumi & Ito, 2018; Yano, 2018), and they claim that self-monitoring, peer-evaluation (Yano, 2017), and model observing (Okada, et al., 2017) have positive effects on improving learners’ oral presentation skills. However, the number of studies on this topic is quite small, particularly those conducted in Japanese educational settings. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize their results.

Thus, this current study investigated how Japanese English learners can improve their English oral presentation skills through CL. In the next section, this study’s methodology is presented.

3 Methodology

Eighteen Japanese undergraduates joined this one-semester-long study. The study was carried out in one of their compulsory courses, “Introduction to Language and Communication,” in the fall semester of 2021. The purpose of this course was to foster academic and English skills of first-year students and prepare them for various English-medium classes. To fulfill this purpose, this course was conducted in English, which is a foreign language to the students, but during CL activities, the students were allowed to use their first language, Japanese.

The course consisted of a) group presentation of reading assignments, b) CL, and c) presentations of their projects. Originally, speaking tests were planned at the beginning and end of the course, but these were canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each student was assigned into a group, and each group was responsible for making a presentation about assigned public speaking skills after reading a textbook. After delivering the group presentation, the teacher provided them with feedback on their presentation performance. The CL included three steps: practicing focused presentation skills, receiving feedback from their peers, and discussing ways to improve their presentation skills. At the end of the semester, they responded to an 18-item questionnaire about what they learned and how they improved their skills.

The research employed thematic analysis on three open-ended questions about how students improved their skills through CL following the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). The six phases are 1) comprehending the data well, 2) yielding initial codes, 3) seeking themes, 4) reconsidering themes, 5) clarifying and naming themes, and 6) reporting.

4 Results

Based on the six-phase thematic analysis, the following five themes were generated: *Noticing the gap*, *Knowledge co-construction*, *Overcome weakness*, *Behavior modeling*, *Psychological improvement*. Table 4.1 presents the summary of the results of the thematic analysis. Table 4.1 includes the five main themes, characteristics of each theme, and codes included the theme. In this section, we will closely look into each theme with some extracts.

Table 1. Thematic representation of the five main themes

Theme	Characteristics	Code
Noticing the gap	Presenters noticed the gap between their intention and the audience's perception.	Noticing the gap: nervousness was positive
		Noticing the gap: emphasis
		Noticing the gap: eye contact
		Noticing good and bad points from peer's feedback
		Feedback from peers: presentation materials
Knowledge co-construction	Learners co-constructed knowledge of presentation through collaborative learning.	Sharing points to be improved with peers
		Discussing one's presentation knowledge and skills
		Making improvement plans with peers
		Confirming information thoroughly in a small group
		Receiving feedback from different people
Overcome weakness	Learners could overcome their weakness through repeating practice in a small group.	Lots of opportunity to practice through mini presentations
		Overcome weakness by receiving feedback from peers
Behavior modeling	Learners learn presentation skills by watching peers' performances.	Learning from peer's performance

Psychological improvement	Learners established relationships with classmates and repeatedly practiced in a small group, which reduced their anxiety and gave them confidence.	Gaining confidence
		Establishing relationships with classmates
		Encouraged by peers in putting forth hard work to give better presentations
		Reduce anxiety by repeatedly giving short presentations.

4.1 Theme 1: Noticing the gap

The learners were able to notice the gap between their intentions and their partners' perceptions. The most-mentioned benefit of the CL activity was receiving objective feedbacks from peers.

Extract 1:

*I felt nervous, but my partner did not notice.
I tried to emphasize the words and make eye contact a lot, but my intention was not being conveyed.
I understood my strong points and weaknesses, which I did not notice myself, through the CL activity.*

4.2 Theme 2: Knowledge co-construction

The learners co-constructed knowledge about delivering oral presentation through the CL activity. They shared points to be improved with each other and discussed improvement plans. The CL activity was carried out in pairs or groups of three, so the students could thoroughly confirm specific points. Moreover, the partners were randomly assigned in each class, so they could receive feedback from various peers.

Extract 2:

*We shared our difficulties and points to be improved. Then, I could practice my weak points again and again in delivering mini-presentations in the CL activity.
Discussing the way to improve our difficulties and weaknesses was beneficial for me.*

4.3 Theme 3: Overcoming weaknesses

The learners felt they could overcome their weaknesses through the CL activity. Practicing the mini-presentations with their partners was particularly beneficial for getting used to delivering oral presentations to audiences.

Extract 3:

I practiced a lot and received feedback through CL activities, which enabled me to overcome my weaknesses.

4.4 Theme 4: Behavior modeling

The students learned about delivering oral presentation skills by watching their peers' presentations and engaging in discussions with them.

Extract: 4

When we showed presentations to each other in the CL activities, I noticed that each presenter had different intentions and ways of emphasizing important points. Then, I could apply what I learned from peers.

4.5 Psychological improvement

The learners established relationships with their classmates, which allowed them to reduce their anxiety and gain more confidence in giving presentations and getting feedback. In addition, they were encouraged by their peers to put forth effort to give better presentations.

Extract: 5

*I could get closer with my classmates emotionally and gain more confidence on delivering presentation to them.
I was stimulated by peers' high-level presentations.*

5 Discussion

The main findings of this qualitative survey clearly indicate that CL activities were beneficial for learning English oral presentation skills in the Japanese context. In other words, consistent with previous studies, the above findings support the idea that CL activities include benefits on sharing knowledge (Coleman, 1998), creating opportunities for learning (Golub, 1988), constructing new understanding (Smith & MacGregor, 1992), and observing and imitating peers' strategies (Azmitia, 1988).

In the Asian EFL context, it has been reported that CL activities were beneficial for making a collaborative presentation (Nguyen, 2013) and improving speaking ability (Pattanpichet, 2011).

The findings of the current study show that CL activity (in this case, it included three steps: practicing focused presentation skills, receiving feedback from their peers, and discussing ways to improve their presentation skills) was beneficial for the Japanese EFL learners' perception of learning oral English presentation skills and knowledge. The Japanese freshmen noticed the gap between their intentions and the audience's perceptions and amended their performances by watching peers' presentations and receiving feedback from peers. Additionally, they shared their weakness and problems with peers and co-constructed ideas for improving their performances. Moreover, they established friendships with classmates and reduced their anxiety for delivering presentations. In other words, the learners tried to improve their own oral presentations through the CL activity.

The current study demonstrates the potential benefits of CL activities in improving English speaking skills in an Asian EFL situation, especially English oral presentation knowledge and the skills of individual learners corroborating the research findings of Nguyen (2013) and Pattanpichet (2011). However, there is some room for improvement. The learners answered the questionnaire at the end of the course, which means they had to remember what and how they thought during the activity. We relied on the learners' memories to investigate what they discussed with peers. In the future, it will be necessary to record their voices during the CL activity and examine what they do during the activity.

As mentioned above, the speaking tests planned for the beginning and end of the course in this study were canceled because of COVID-19. Therefore, an additional limitation is that there are no performance data to examine the effectiveness of the CL activity on improving English oral presentation performance. The current research only investigated the students' perceptions toward CL activities on improving their oral presentations. Therefore, based on these results, it is impossible to say definitively whether their actual performances improved as planned.

6 Conclusion

The findings of the study support the benefits of CL activity in learning English oral presentation skills and knowledge. However, it is unclear whether the activity has any effect on improving Japanese EFL learners' English oral presentation performance. Further study needs to compare learners' presentations between the beginning and the end of the course and examine the effectiveness of the CL activity in improving their performance.

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