

# Communication skills for presentations

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Students often approach a speech as a writing assignment that must then be read aloud. But effective communication involves more than just writing a speech and reading it. How can teachers make students aware of the different factors, e.g., careful planning, appealing to a particular audience, or visual aids, that go into making a good presentation? The presenters will discuss materials for presentation/public speaking classes that can help students develop effective communication skills.

外国語のスピーチの授業は往々にして、学生がよい原稿を書くことに焦点があたり、書き上げた後は大きな声で読むだけになりがちである。しかし、それだけで効果的なコミュニケーションができるようにはならない。教員は、学生が注意深く発表の計画をたて、特定のオーディエンスにアピールする方法を考え、どんな資料をどんな形で見せるのか、どのように話せばよりよく伝わるのか、といったことを、段階的に、くりかえしとりあげていかねばならない。この論文では、学習者の英語の知識量の差 (TOEIC 100点台-800点台) や、実際に生活の中で英語を使った経験の差、学習経験のちがいなどに合わせて、プレゼンテーション能力を育てる学習活動の実践例を、摂南大学のカリキュラムから紹介する。

Learning effective presentation is more than just writing a speech and reading it aloud. Students often approach a speech as a writing assignment that must then be read aloud. They don't consider other factors that aid communication in oral presentation, such as how to appeal to a particular audience, or how to use visual aids.

How can teachers make students aware of the different factors that go into making a good presentation? This article will discuss practical teaching materials and activities for presentation/public speaking classes that can help students develop more effective communication skills. These materials will include individual and group activities that can be used by students at different levels.

The activities for beginners will focus on ways for students to plan presentations by using visuals such as storyboards and working out gestures from a script. The intermediate activities will focus on activities other than individual speeches, for example how to use scenes from movies or plays to develop presentation skills. The advanced section will focus on ways to appeal to the interest of advanced students by giving them responsibilities and more freedom to choose how and what to do in class. There will also be discussion of methods of student self-evaluation, and record keeping.

Students have different learning styles so it is a teacher's job to provide different types of classroom activities for language learning. Willis and Hodson (1999) observed that it is widely recognized that learners acquire a higher level ability to think logically only when they learn in a learning style that suits them. Orthodox teaching styles used in the

classroom are suited to only some learners—those who can sit quietly and follow the teacher's explanations. At any age level learners make use of multiple learning styles depending on the situation. So sticking to any one style is unlikely to achieve optimum results.

Ishikawa (2004) points out that in orthodox Japanese education teachers aim to have students achieve good results on written tests. So the teaching focuses on giving knowledge and students are encouraged to aim for one correct answer.

### A description of the presentation classes

The Faculty of Foreign Studies at Setsunan University in Osaka started a totally new English curriculum in 2004 which includes Drama and Presentation classes. The beginning of the new curriculum coincided with the name change of the faculty from *kokusai gengo bunka gakubu* (Faculty of International Language and Culture) to *gaikokugo gakubu* (Faculty of Foreign Studies). The new curriculum focuses more on students' presentation and communication skills. The following is a brief description of the English presentation classes for intermediate level.

There are two presentation curricula, English Presentation I for beginners' level, which is for students in the first year, and English Presentation II for intermediate level for the second-year students. English Presentation II is divided into three streamed classes made up of 15-25 students (about 70 students in all). The classes are taught by three teachers who change classes every semester. For example, one teacher takes a lower class in the spring semester, and then

an intermediate class in the fall semester. After the spring semester each teacher provides a description of the teaching materials and the class to the teacher who takes over the class in the fall semester.

### *Classroom activities in presentation classes*

Activities in the classes include both individual and group presentations. An example of an individual activity for a beginning level class is the micro presentation method adopted from a training program for teachers, “the micro teaching method,” developed at Stanford University (Yamaguchi, 1986, pp. 194-200). The students first work in pairs or small groups to verbalize or visualize their ideas on an assigned topic. Then they develop their ideas into 15- to 30-second micro presentations in English. Then they give their presentations to the whole class or record them on video. Afterward the students can discuss their performances and give each other feedback on what makes a successful presentation. They can also watch the video recording for self evaluation.

It has been found that when video is used as a regular part of the presentation classes, the best results come when the students take turns recording each other, operating the camera and giving cues to the speakers. When the students themselves are using the camera regularly they quickly become aware of points that make for a better or poorer delivery and how they can help the speaker from behind the camera.

For the group presentation the students in each class form themselves in groups of two or three and select their own

topic for their presentations. Examples of topics include bonsai, kabuki, flower arrangement, smoking, marriage, and the drop in the birth rate in Japan. After deciding on their themes, each group discusses the topic and collects data about it. Then the group begins to prepare a draft and visual-aids for their presentation. Students are strongly advised to prepare visual aids such as figures, graphs, photos, and so on for the purpose of drawing the audience’s attention. Most students use large sheets of paper as media for their visual aids. Then they practice and memorize their drafts.

Each student group gives a 3-minute presentation in their own class. Their presentation performances are recorded on videotape for self-evaluation and in order to keep a record to follow each class through the 3-year program of the curriculum.

The audience evaluates the groups/presenters on a scale of 1 to 4 (poor, fair, good, and very good) in terms of voice volume, pronunciation, eye contact, use of visual media, etc. The evaluation form also includes a space where students can write their own comments. An example of student comments was that while some visual aids were well done, the English delivery that went with them could be improved.

This procedure is followed in each of the regular English Presentation II classes. Those groups which received favorable reviews are entered in a bigger joint presentation meeting at the end of the term. Groups representing all the three streamed classes give their presentations at a joint presentation meeting at the end of the term. Although the groups participating in the joint presentation meeting are not ranked according to their performance, those which receive favorable reviews typically have the following features:

1. the students completely memorized their presentation;
2. they prepared clear and easy-to-see visual-aids;
3. they were likely to be in the top or upper stream.

The second-year intermediate level students have less difficulty making presentations than the first-year beginners' level students but we find some in the lower stream still have as much difficulty, and it is necessary to encourage and motivate them. On the other hand, the joint presentation meeting is enjoyable and exciting for the students. In the future, we'd like to use such joint meetings to help motivate students more. We also hope to develop activities and teaching materials that will help students learn the process of preparing good presentations. We would especially like to develop ways to improve the lower and intermediate level students' presentation skills.

### **Presentation in content-based courses**

Short presentations are also widely used as a part of the summing up stage of content-based courses in English. They encourage students to combine their new knowledge and their performing skill in English. Advanced level students, especially, may learn about the technique or structure of a good presentation while they are observing teachers explain the theory or logic of a particular subject. Such examples in Setsunan University's curriculum are the "Teacher Trainees' course for Practice Teaching" and "Special Lectures on English Linguistics."

Participants in the teacher trainees' courses learn how to construct lessons through workshops. Learners prepare and

give a micro lesson (5 minutes) in English with a detailed lesson plan. Their performance is recorded on video for self-evaluation, in order to help them create better classes in the future. The general aim of the course is not solely to develop presentation skills, but students in the course do need those skills in order to achieve their ultimate goal of being a good teacher who can give interesting classes.

In the linguistics course, the teacher introduces the notion of word structure and how modern English vocabulary developed into its current form and meaning. He deconstructs a word, such as the preposition *over*, which may look like a single unit to the students' eyes. Then the teacher demonstrates where various meanings of the word derive from and how seemingly unrelated meanings of a word are connected. In the case of *over* this can be illustrated by starting with the simple meaning of one object being above another. The demonstration can continue with other meanings, such as *crossover*, where an object passes through a position (e.g., a bird flying over a tree; a boy jumping over a fence), and conclude with the meaning of *to finish* or *to complete*, as in "class is over." The students are then assigned other words and must give oral presentations on the hypotheses they have developed on how various meanings of the words were derived by analyzing their structure.

Most advanced level students are also preparing for job hunting in the near future. The skills they develop in these content-based courses help their performance in the native language as well. Gaining confidence and performance skills through various activities in and out the classroom, students will be able to use them in real-life situations.

## Using drama in the classroom

Many teachers in the Language Faculty use plays, skits, or similar activities in the classroom, but most have had little or no practical experience in drama and have never before taught a class based entirely on drama. This section discusses four basic elements necessary for a successful drama class, some problems teachers may encounter and some suggested solutions, and finally some activities that have been successfully used in university classes.

### Focus

The first element necessary for a successful drama class is focus, a concept Spolin gives special attention to in her book *Theater Games for the Classroom* (1986). Students need to be given a central problem or situation to focus on. The problem must be able to be solved by all members of the class, and so the instructions given at this point need to be very clear. The focus should be seen as the “ball” in the activity that concentrates all the students’ energies. Spolin (1986, p. 5) states, “With focus between all, dignity and privacy are maintained and true peerage can evolve.”

### Sidecoaching

*Sidecoaching* is a term used by Spolin to refer to guidance provided by the teacher to help the students maintain their focus during the activities. This encouragement should be general if possible, and not focus on individual students. Sidecoaching allows the teacher to become part of the action of the classroom and helps keep the pace of the activities going.

## Evaluation

Drama can only be effectively done if the students feel safe and trust their fellow students and the teacher. Thus, it is very important to keep evaluation non-judgmental. There is no real ‘right way’ of doing something, and each individual must be allowed to interpret the material in his or her own way. All ideas should be acceptable (within reason).

During the evaluation stage the teacher restates the focus of the activity and the students have equal opportunities to discuss what has happened. This discussion should lead to reflection and stimulate the students’ learning.

### Respect

The final element is respect. This is respect for all participants by all participants. It should be made clear that it is unacceptable to ridicule or make negative comments about other students. The students should understand that what you are doing is a group activity and will only be successful if all participants cooperate. With all four of these elements in place, a comfortable atmosphere should be created where students can develop their skills.

### Problems and solutions

Two problems teachers may be worried about are students’ non-participation and lack of confidence in their spoken-English ability. Non-participation is usually due to uncertainty and fear of disapproval. Making sure the essential elements described above are in place can help students overcome this. Keeping the focus of the activities clear and simple helps most students overcome their

uncertainty and gives them the confidence to join in fully. Re-emphasizing the group nature of drama and the element of respect can help them overcome fear of disapproval.

Lack of confidence in spoken English, or perceived lack of ability is sometimes seen as a problem particularly blocking creativity, but this should not be the case. All students should be able to participate if the focus is clear and appropriate for their level. The teacher and the students should have realistic goals. For example, most students are not good at improvisation particularly at the beginning of a course, and may find the experience overwhelming. Bridging activities can be used to build the students' confidence. The activities chosen depend very much on the dynamics in the classroom and the goals the teacher and students have.

### *Using drama to improve presentation skills*

Drama and Presentation classes might seem to concentrate on different kinds of skills but in many ways they can be complimentary. The group activities or activities in drama classes can be used to improve presentation skills in individual speeches. Teachers who teach public speaking or presentation often mention problems such as lack of eye contact, monotone speaking, and lack of pauses for punctuation or emphasis.

For students who are uncomfortable speaking individually before an audience, group activities, such as those in a drama class, are a way for them to become more relaxed about speaking or performing in front of an audience. When coaching students in the delivery of lines in a drama, teachers can address the problems mentioned above from

another direction. Instead of teaching eye contact or pausing at the end of a sentence as an individual technique (which sometimes results in a mechanical response), these points can be worked into the context of a larger group lesson. In large classes group activities may be a more efficient use of time—speeches by 35 students can be very time consuming and after a while they all begin to sound the same.

### *Teaching materials*

Material used in the drama classes at Setsunan University commonly includes play and movie scripts from a variety of sources. Movie scenes in particular offer a very adaptable source of material. The scenes themselves can easily be shortened or lengthened according to time constraints or the number of students. Scenes with two or three characters are easier to stage. In staging plays or scenes from them, a lot of time can be spent explaining or laying out the action and movements of the characters. When using a movie scene, the teacher can show the scene to the students so they can see what is happening and get an idea of how the lines should be delivered. Compared to many plays—ones specially written for EFL or otherwise—the lines in movies tend to be shorter. This makes it easier to repeat the lines and work on delivery. This can be used to address problems in students' delivery of speeches such as monotone and lack of pauses.

### *Classroom activities*

When we have a conversation, or act, there are three essential parts we use to make the message clear: body, voice, and mind. In drama classes the focus is usually placed

on the first two parts, the body and voice. Our bodies provide the physical message that is realized through our actions, gestures, facial expressions, and voice. Often students are absorbed in the words on the paper rather than how they are said and the way messages can be conveyed through body language and voice. To try and focus the students' energies on the physical aspect of a message, here are some useful activities:

1. Students mime situations and others guess what they are trying to say. This activity can be made as easy or as difficult as required by changing the situation.
2. Students work from a given dialogue and create their own gestures to go with it.
3. Students work with the gestures only and create the dialogue to go with it.
4. Students watch videos and note how the gestures/ action convey meaning, e.g. Mr. Bean.
5. Using storyboards, students take a dialogue and draw the action scene by scene.
6. Students create tableaux, or "freeze frames," based on a dialogue, and take photographs. This promotes a lot of discussion on what the central message of a dialogue or scene is.

Other activities focus on the part our voice plays in conveying a message:

1. Students learn the dialogue from the teacher through repetition. Here the teacher provides the model for how the dialogue is said.

2. Students try to give each other messages just saying, 'mmm,' with meaningful intonation.
3. Students are given a sentence such as 'It's raining', then they are given different situations and therefore different meanings for each sentence and they think about how the sentences are said, for example mother to child, farmer to wife, or someone in the desert.

### Conclusion

We hope that this paper will show how Drama and Presentation activities can be integrated into an English curriculum. One aim of the activities is to help the students improve their ability to communicate in spoken English. Another is to provide students with learning experiences in which there is not necessarily one right answer. In classes where questions of grammar or spelling are the focus there is, usually, one correct answer. In a class focusing on presentation, however, students may face situations where there are multiple ways to stress words or sentences, or different ways to present information. The students then have to learn the most suitable option for the situation.

When students leave school and go out into society, having knowledge is not enough. In life outside school there is usually more than one right answer. Teachers need to help students acquire the ability to choose the most appropriate option in different situations.

Teaching drama may seem difficult for teachers who have had no previous experience, but the elements that have been discussed above can help them achieve a successful class. In addition, the activities described are extremely flexible and

can be modified to suit all levels of students. Students who have no previous experience in drama can benefit greatly from making the words on a page come alive for themselves and for other students.

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