

Enhancing EFL discussions and presentations using portable visual aids

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Improving performance in presentation and discussion activities is challenging for many EFL students due to their inexperience in leading discussions, difficulty in organizing ideas in English and their lack of vocabulary. Portable visual aids have been shown to help non-English major university students focus on main ideas more clearly, synthesize information more easily, and formulate provocative questions more naturally, thereby enhancing EFL students' discuss-ability.

コミュニケーションのクラスのEFLの学生に討論を指導するのは困難である。というのは、ほとんどの学生が論題に集中できない。また、討論を展開する経験がないのが現状である。容易に持ち運びできる視覚教材があれば、学生自身で学べることができ、彼らの討論能力を推進できる。この論文は彼らの討論参加とプレゼンに役に立つ二個の視覚教材を紹介する。これらの教材は学生が情報をまとめ、論題に集中し、それゆえ挑戦的な質問を思考するのに効果的であるとわれわれは考えるのである。

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE in presentation and discussion activities is challenging for many EFL students due to their inexperience in leading discussions, difficulty in organizing ideas in English, and their lack of vocabulary. This article describes two portable visual aids that can help EFL students improve their participation and performance in discussions and presentation activities. Portable visual aids have been shown to help non-English major university students focus on main ideas more clearly, synthesize information more easily, and formulate provocative questions more naturally thereby enhancing EFL students' discuss-ability.

Our university students are all non-English majors enrolled in EFL communication classes at five different Tokyo area universities. In all of these classes language skill strands (reading, writing and speaking-listening) are integrated. The average class size is 25 students, but even larger classes of 40 students have successfully used these visual aids.

The visual aids

One of the visual aids is a collage, made of images and key words, sprinkled randomly on a sheet of A-4 paper, useful in small group discussions. The second visual aid is in the form of a

pyramid, made from a folded sheet of A-3 or B-4 paper, useful in preparing for and presenting information to small groups.

These portable visual aids free students from merely reading prepared texts and enable them to focus more clearly on main ideas, synthesize information more easily and formulate provocative questions naturally. Students become more autonomous, guiding themselves to improve their discuss-ability.

Portability emphasizes competence in summarizing and presenting information concisely in compact, adaptable formats that are easily shared with others in small, interactive groups. Interaction, a necessary part of language acquisition (van Lier, 1996) is encouraged in the use of these portable visual aids. Interaction is more meaningful and motivating when it has a clear purpose (Brown & Yule, 1983).

The sharing of visual aids is holistic, an activity “which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both.” (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 69). The non-linguistic outcome is “a pragmatic conclusion to the task,” which can include anything from laughter, which shows understanding and enjoyment, to a more introspective examination of the visual, which can produce discussion questions (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 68).

Small groups of 3-5 students are preferable to large group presentations in EFL classes, yielding better results than whole-class activities. In other words, the emphasis is on holistic not whole-istic. Small groups encourage feelings of competence, help establish common ground, focus attention on specifics, and lead to better pacing and more explorative talk (Barnes, 1976). In small groups opportunities abound for negotiation of meaning, increased autonomy, self-regulation and more intrinsic motivation (van Lier, 2001).

The collage

In an art form, a collage is an assemblage of pieces of information consisting of color and texture. In an EFL visual aid, these pieces of information consist of images and words. Collages are small, made with images cut and pasted from newspapers, magazines, and from the internet on which key words, captions, headlines, blurbs and idioms are randomly placed. Collages are easily prepared by teachers or students for use in meeting style discussions. A collage topic could be about a student’s hobby or might highlight items from the news of the week. See Appendix 1 for an example of a collage visual aid used in an EFL class discussion.

The random placement of the images and words on the collage spawns lively matching activities that support some of the goals of an EFL communications class: learning vocabulary without the use of a dictionary, making connections between topics, and forming intriguing questions that provoke interesting conversations.

As mentioned before, we have found that collages are best used in small discussion groups following simple procedures that resemble a meeting.

Discussions in the style of a meeting

Meetings usually revolve around an agenda and follow prescribed procedures. In typical EFL classes, teachers believe that in order to ensure English output, they must make students give oral presentations. Students usually resort to reading from a prepared text, while the audience sits silently waiting their turn. The presenter rarely connects to the other participants. Participants show little sign of comprehension and pose no questions. This type of presentation offers no chance for interaction. The discussion falls flat into an exercise of form with no real communication of content or enhancement of communication skills.

In contrast, in a meeting-style discussion the collage becomes the agenda, helping the participants to focus on a single or a set of topics. Simple and clear procedures include separate roles for each participant, for example, leader, dictionary person, time-keeper, messenger, and secretary. All students participate, all have the opportunity to set the agenda, and all get a chance to lead others in a spirited information-filled discussion in which provocative questions come naturally and are discussed.

Examples of collage in use

We have used the collage in four different universities, with students majoring in economics, foreign languages, law, and dentistry.

Example 1

Participants: 24 economics majors of mixed grades, English experiences, nationalities and mother tongues

Setting: Economics Faculty of a large private university in suburban Tokyo.

Activity: “Topic Talk” a current events sharing activity

Purpose: To give each student opportunities to lead a small group of peers in a discussion about the week’s news events.

Procedure: The leaders chose three news stories to highlight in a collage (one news story set in Japan, one global and one free choice), which they prepare at home. During the discussion, the leaders ask for self-introductions and make a brief introduction of the three news stories. The other group members are asked to write three questions about the news stories in their notebook, which can be checked by the teacher for form and style. The leaders ask their partners to read their questions aloud. The questions are written on a large poster by the leader or the secretary. The discussion revolves around the posted questions

and the collage. Students take notes and are given a follow-up assignment by the leader.

Result: All students, regardless of experience in English, were able to lead lively discussions for up to 45 minutes with all group members participating and minimal input from the teacher.

Example 2

Participants: 24 first-year university Spanish majors in a required English credit course

Setting: Foreign Language Department of a private university in suburban Tokyo

Activity: Self introduction interview collage

Purpose: Enable students to talk about their interests and origins

Procedure: Students are assigned a partner with whom they hold interviews, recording responses in their notebooks. Afterwards, they write key words and draw images, in collage form, to explain the interview responses.

Result: Many lively activities came out of this activity. Not only could the students speak about themselves and their partners, but any student could pick up any of the collages in the classroom and begin a conversation or presentation.

An end of semester questionnaire was given to the students. The following comments illustrate the benefits of using collages. We have left the comments unedited.

- *I like the poster that draw a line keyword to picture. Because, it is very active and I can know many new words in the pictures and keywords.*
- *The most interesting thing is the key word quiz in the picture. It is very difficult for me, but very interesting.*

- *The collage was interesting. We can talk everyone. Not listen to one person speech.*
- *This is not a class... it's more like a club meeting!*

The pyramid

The pyramid is made from a folded piece of paper (A-3 or B-4) that becomes, in five simple steps, a three-dimensional prop useful in small group presentations. Making a pyramid serves as a good class exercise in listening to and following directions. The pyramid has up to eight triangular shaped surfaces on which images and key words are arranged. These images can be drawn by the students or obtained from the Internet, magazines, newspapers, or the students can use photos they have taken. See Appendix 2 for photographs of students using pyramid visual aids.

Pyramid shaped visual aids help students focus on the main ideas of a topic and synthesize information about the topic within the constraints of the available surfaces, planning information in sets of adjacent surfaces or comparing aspects of a topic by contrasting the inside surfaces with the outside panels. The leader can use the pyramid as a free-standing structure, set on its side to be used as a stage, worn as a hat, or hung as a mobile. The high impact visual nature of the pyramid always invites interest and questions from the audience. It also invites the tactile experience of manipulating the pyramid to view one side or another to ask or answer questions.

Preparing topics is simplified by the concentration on images and key words rather than creating a lengthy written text, which is difficult to share with an audience.

The main goal of presenting information using a pyramid is constructing meaning, collaboratively, with the audience. The leader, then, has to be more attentive to the audience's needs. The pyramid holds the information together for all to see at the

same time, and allows each presentation to be unique. Since a different audience will react differently, there are unlimited opportunities to practice communication.

In conventional EFL classes, presentation techniques are often taught to students in lockstep fashion, each part in isolation, resulting in a cookie cutter speech that is simply read to an unengaged audience. Using an overly scripted text, a presentation ends with the leader pronouncing "the end", followed by an uncomfortable interlude of silence, maybe a feeble, gratuitous question from the bravest student then anticipation to get the next presentation over and done with.

Instead, in a pyramid driven presentation, the leader's instinct about the nature of presenting is activated by his or her schemata rather than dictated by recipe-like procedures. It is natural to have a beginning, middle and end in a presentation. These presentations are no longer scripted, and so it is easier for the students to ignore structural conventions in favor of increased fluency, moving back and forth from surface to surface on their pyramids. The "text" is no longer strictly formatted; it flows. The presentation unfolds naturally through the panels of the pyramid and participants are free to handle the pyramid, examine it, asking questions along the way. The goal for EFL presentation is communication and the construction of meaning

Examples

We have used the pyramids in many university settings with students majoring in a variety of disciplines.

Example 3

Participants: 32 first-year students in an Oral Communication class in which a book of three adventure stories is used to anchor some of the class activities.

Setting: Economics Faculty of a large private university in suburban Tokyo

Activity: To report on aspects of three stories and compare the information to events outside the story.

Purpose: To report on reading and extend the story.

Procedure: On one side of the pyramid is information from inside the stories. On the opposing side is information from outside the stories. For example, one story concerns a team of women who climbed Mt. Annapurna in Nepal. Students could report on equipment, the ascent procedure or any aspect of the climb from inside the story and on opposing pyramid panels put information about another mountain expedition outside the story.

Result: A deeper knowledge of the stories and active use of the vocabulary from the stories.

Example 4

Participants: 4 groups of 32 first year dentistry students in a required English oral communication class

Setting: A dental school at a large university in central Tokyo

Activity: To examine healthy eating habits and compare students' own habits to an ideal food pyramid

Purpose: To conduct research and learn about how a healthy diet affects one's life.

Procedure: Students kept records of food intake for one week, did research on food pyramids and interviewed each other about eating habits, then designed a pyramid to hold the information for presenting.

Result: Creative interpretations of food pyramids and documentation of eating habits.

Example 5

Who: 30 second-year students majoring in a foreign language (not English).

Setting: A large public university in suburban Tokyo

Activity: "Five Good Things in the World"

Purpose: To research and discuss current events

Procedure: After discussing a podcast which introduces five short positive news events around the world. Students then prepare a pyramid with visuals and keywords to five positive news stories about one country that they have researched.

Results: Colorful, creative pyramids on stories ranging from Nobel Prizes to new tako-yaki stands. The realization that there are just as many good news stories, if you look, as there are tragic ones. I have never heard so many students say, へえええ, in one 90-minute period.

Example 6

Who: First year students in a required Action Communication course in which the use of extensive readers are a feature of the course.

How many: 24 students

Where: Law faculty of a large private university in suburban Tokyo

Activity: Design a pyramid to represent the elements of a favorite extensive reader.

Purpose: To share your favorite book with others.

Procedure: Decide on how the pyramid would be used; as a stage, a pyramidal shaped structure, a hat, a mobile and how the surfaces would be designed in a manner that best suits the nature of the story.

Result: A collection of beautiful pyramid shaped posters which

were used in several sharing activities: peer to peer, small group presentation and art gallery (see below).

The portable nature of the devices makes it possible to create a range of different kinds of communication activities, increasing movement in the classroom. For example, capitalizing on the small size of the visual aids, you can have an art gallery of pyramids around which students walk, stop, visit, touch, examine and formulate questions. In another type of activity the creator of the pyramid is not essential, giving other students the opportunity to create and present an interpretation of someone else's pyramid.

The teacher's role in using these visual aids

Dornyei (2001b) writes of motivational conditions that create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere and a cohesive learner group with appropriate norms as well as creating a sense of goal-orientedness (p. 125). These visual aids help students find a balance of comfort and challenge while giving them permission to act differently than they may be accustomed in an EFL class. It is the informed teacher who grants them this freedom.

The teacher is the “knower” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), a roaming facilitator, answering inquiries, clearing up problems, checking grammar and suggesting better questions to students. Optimal learning is described as moving outside your comfort zone by experiencing new ways of processing input and output (Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher scaffolds this process and the construction of meaning by giving students simple and clear means to build a discussion or a presentation based more on their schemata than memorized, under-processed information (Nunan, 1990).

Gardner (1999) supports the theory of multiple intelligences. For the teacher, this implies the need to be open to a reformulation of the goals and processes of discussion and presentation,

allowing for more flexibility and tolerance for doing things differently.

Paradigm shift

The use of these visual aids requires a shift in the paradigm of what constitutes the goals and methodology of discussion and presentation in EFL classes. The emphasis is on negotiation of meaning rather than perfect grammatical presentation. The goal is not to finish a scripted report, but to engage in a lively and informative discussion.

The paradigm is shifted to focus on engagement with the audience, clarity of idea, the use of provocative key words and images and the solicitation of questions from the audience, whereas in conventional presentations students may be overloaded with structural details and phraseology, too intent on delivering a pre-cast lecture which is less useful for development of communication skills and will have less utility in students' lives.

Dornyei (2001a) emphasizes that the way a task is presented – explaining the purpose and utility of a task – increases motivation. Raising awareness about the way the visual aids, and the discussion skills learned with them, are useful for presentations, meetings, and other real-life situations adds to student motivation. When discussions and presentations in EFL classes are less rehearsed and conducted naturally, they have proved to be valuable as tools to achieve competence in communication and increased motivation.

The success of using the visual aids rests on a shift of the goals and expectations of EFL students and their teachers. Students must become more aware of a sense of form and purpose in planning and presenting, more aware of the roles of the participants in a discussion and the needs of an audience in a presentation as well as the need as a participant to ask intriguing and

provocative questions. Teachers must accept that one size does not fit all in presentation training and discussion activities. We must abandon static, linear forms of presentation and the need to control the agenda. Instead, discussion and presentation activities, through the use of portable visual aids, become opportunities for all to work together to construct meaning around topics of interest.

Benefits realized using the collage and the pyramid as visual aids

We realized many benefits using the two visual aids described in this article with hundreds of EFL university students, by changing the emphasis, goals and procedures. Some of the benefits are outlined below.

1. **Communication** is enhanced due to the interactivity of the discussions and presentations. This frees students from the traditional, linear style of presentation with formulaic delivery rules.
2. **Engagement of all students** increases since they are close to the visual – can touch it, point to it, manipulate it – and are required to have a role in the discussion or presentation. The teachers have found that, using portable visual aids, student discussions can go on for 45 minutes or more.
3. **Question-making skills** improve because the process of creation encourages students to think about their topics in different, non-linear ways. The structure of the pyramid (3 outer surfaces and 3 inner surfaces) promotes thinking sequentially, as well as in contrast and about details. The structure also encourages interesting questions.
4. **Vocabulary development** is more effective during the matching phase of the discussions because students ask the leader clarification and confirmation questions instead of using their dictionaries.
5. **Focus shifts to the audience.** Students become aware of the needs of the audience because of the interactive nature of the discussions. The speaker's intent is secondary.
6. **Students become more autonomous**, guiding themselves in learning how to prepare and deliver information to small groups and collecting feedback from the audience to form an opinion. Some students made collages and pyramids for other purposes, even when not assigned to do so; others experimented with different visual styles without being prompted.
7. **As multi-modal devices**, the visual aids are more in line with current movements in media and communication which tend to be more visual.
8. **Teacher preparation and evaluation time is reduced** because of the portability and low-tech nature of the visual aids.

Conclusion

This article offers no conclusive, quantitative data on the impact of using the visual aids to improve students' performance in presentation and discussion activities. Rather, the visual aids themselves exist as potent artifacts drawing attention to the improvements in performance, engagement and achievement in presentation and discussion activities.

Anecdotal evidence in the form of observations, visual aid artifacts, student notebooks, and photographs record student engagement, enthusiasm and performance in ways that conventional modes of data collection (questionnaires, video tape recording and interviewing) would not.

Observations show a positive change in the engagement of the students. Once passive students are now active. More students ask more and better questions. The energy and confidence produced by a successful presentation/discussion motivates

students to continue to try more challenging material. The tasks of discussion and presentation become both informational and enjoyable. Because of their role as facilitator, the teachers can advise more of the students more frequently.

Rather than morose, unmotivated non-English majors who sat through presentations passively and silently waiting for their turn, we now notice non-English majors who have become vocal, cooperative and engaged when participating in presentations and discussions.

Although communicative language teaching methods have recently come out of fashion again in Japan, the need for truly communicative approaches is greater than ever (Willis & Willis, 2009). Our experiences using the portable visual aids to enhance discussions and presentations answers this need by helping students engage in the negotiation and creation of meaning.

Bio data

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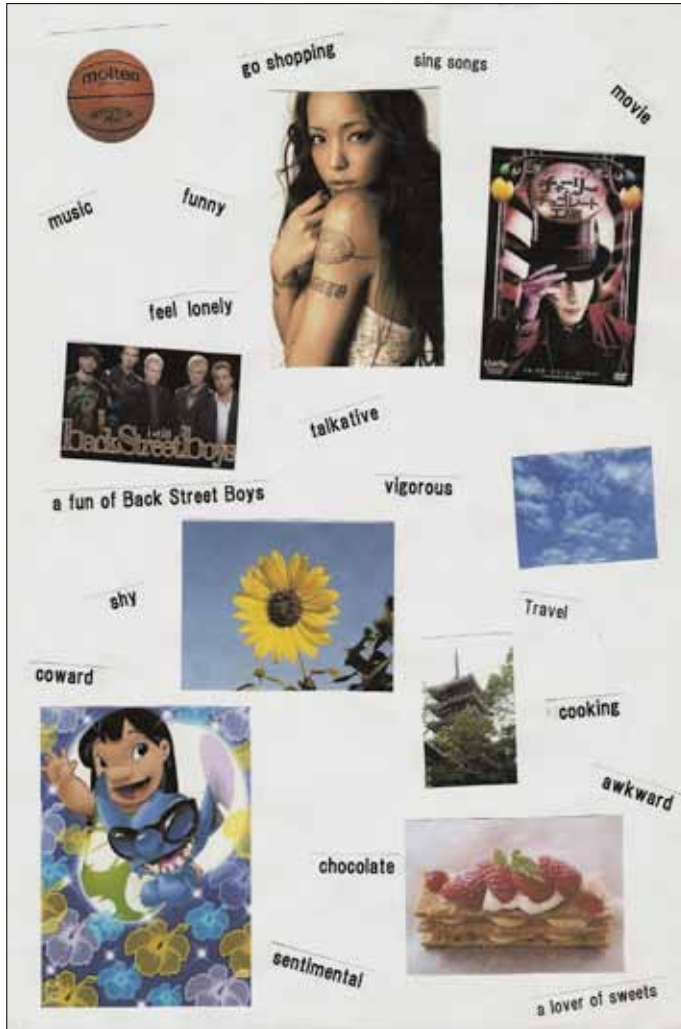
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Appendix I Collages





Appendix 2 Pyramids being used in an EFL classroom

